

interzone

JANUARY 2002

NUMBER 175

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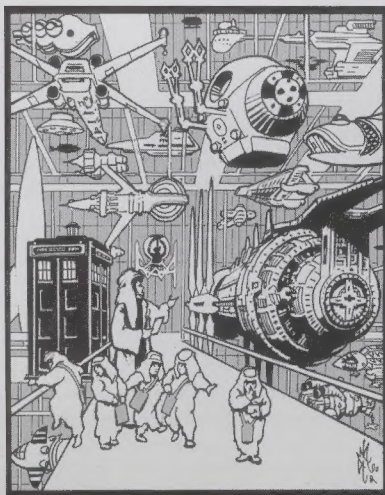
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

JANUARY 2002

Number 175

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Dear Editors:

Please find enclosed a cheque to renew my subscription to *Interzone* for another year. Having just caught up with the last eight issues (!), I thought I would get my votes in early for the 2001 Popularity Poll. The best story of the year was definitely "The Children of Winter" by Eric Brown (issue 163). Other stories that I particularly enjoyed were:

"Speedstream" by James Lovegrove (163)

"Lost Continent" by Stephen Baxter (164)

"Surfers" by Ruairidh Pringle (164)

"Partial Eclipse" by Graham Joyce (165)

"Hijack Holiday" by Ian Watson (166)

"Restoring the Balance (I & II)" by Tony Ballantyne (167 & 168)

"Isabel of the Fall" by Ian R. MacLeod (169)

"The Frankenberg Process" by Eric Brown (171)

"Junk Male" by James Lovegrove (171)

"Meeting the Relatives" by Ruairidh Pringle (171)

"Indecisive Weapons" by Tony Ballantyne (172)

"Watching the Sea" by Chris Beckett (173)

Issues 163 and 171 were the best two issues of *IZ* for a long time; very good stories and good non-fiction too.

I would say that 2001 was an excellent year for *Interzone* (apart from Richard Calder's interminable "Lord Soho" series). "Ansible Link" and "Mutant Popcorn" were their usual brilliant selves, the book reviews are entertaining and invaluable, the letters page is always interesting, Gary Westfahl is at least well written – but *Evelyn Lewes*!!? Anyway, more translated stories and new writers; and how about an article about W. Olaf Stapledon or William Hope Hodgson? Thank you for entertaining me for another year.

L. A. Mullane
London

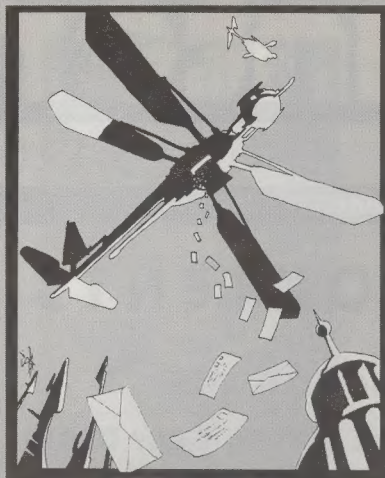
"Filthy Pervert"

Dear Editors:

Dominic Green should be strung up by the balls, the dirty filthy pervert!

Only kidding, but his "Queen of Hearts" (*Interzone* 173) was provocative as well as funny. Not only does he dare to jest on the matter of child abuse – or more properly our attitudes to it – but he also commits the sin of poking fun at those who have canonized Princess Di since her "untimely, tragic demise." Certainly one of the funniest stories I have read in a while, and it works well as a neat *Nineteen Eighty-Four* update in its examination of our cultural mores, perceptions and attitudes. Bloody hell, it's very nearly science fiction! Thank you for refreshing my jaded palate.

Adrian Hodges
Cheltenham, Glos.



INTERACTION

"Child Pornography"

Dear Editors:

I have just read "Ansible Link" (*IZ* 173) and had to write. I am sure that I must be just one of many to be utterly shocked that a reader actually reported *Interzone* to the police for publishing "The Salt Box" by Gwyneth Jones (*IZ* 169).

If that (unnamed) reader is still buying the magazine I have a couple of things to say:

1 – Get a life.

2 – Get a life.

Dennis Lane
Geddington
dennislane999@hotmail.com

Medieval Wisdom

Dear Editors:

Having just read Gene Wolfe's essay on Tolkien (*Interzone* 174) I feel compelled to write. I am currently a student of the period Wolfe calls "the beginning of the true Middle Ages," and I have recently started to read *The Fellowship of the*

Ring. For me "The Best Introduction to the Mountains" was potent and resonant, drawing two aspects of my current life together, and explicating the important links between Tolkien's work as a scholar and his work as a writer of vivid fantasy epic. I was already, prior to reading the essay, making loose and inchoate connections between my studies and Tolkien's novel. I must thank Wolfe for making the spirit flesh.

On a different note, I would like to comment briefly on Evelyn Lewes; or, more precisely, on the letters inspired by her. Jonathan Moffett appears to object to Ms Lewes expressing her personal preferences in her column. I can't help but wonder what she is left to express, if she can't write of her own personal likes and dislikes. Should she express Mr Moffett's opinions? My opinions? The opinions of a select and balanced sample of members of a *Babylon 5* fan club? Mr Moffett also objects to Ms Lewes because she picks holes in the plotting and acting and costumes of *B5*... What, dare I ask, is a TV critic supposed to do if not express their opinion, and criticize what they dislike about a programme's production values? And why should Ms Lewes, as Lynne Lancaster seems to suggest, objectively explore why millions of people enjoy *B5*? Evelyn Lewes does not enjoy *B5*, and I'd rather know why she *doesn't* like it, than read her hypothesis for why millions do.

I don't watch *Buffy* or *B5* on a regular basis, and feel passionately about neither. I was put off *B5* many years ago by the wooden acting, the tacky sets, and the complete lack of any sense of purpose, place, or direction. And *Buffy* amuses me in the same way competent rock music tends to: I'm entertained, but soon completely forget what it was I just watched or listened to. However, I do read Ms Lewes's column regularly, so please, can we keep her (along with the letters of complaint)?

Graham Jelley
Oxford

2001 Popularity Poll

If you can cast your mind back over the past twelve issues, those that carried a 2001 cover date, we'd appreciate it if you could judge last year's stories. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of *Interzone* issues 163 to 174 inclusive. (The contents of the current issue, number 175, will count towards *next* year's poll.)

There's no obligation, but we'd appreciate it if readers (especially, perhaps, those who are writing to renew their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of **31st March 2002**. We'll report the results later in the year.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 163-174 inclusive (i.e. those with a 2001 cover date) did you particularly like?
- 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 163-174 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?

Any further comments about the magazine, including its non-fiction and artwork, are also welcome.

David Pringle, Editor

TV Sci-Fi

Dear Editors:

In *Interzone* 173, I read with interest Tim Robins's analysis of Douglas Adams's *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (in all of its various manifestations). I would agree with Robins that, "Adams's bathetic technique works against the emotional core of science fiction" and that, whilst often very funny and inventive, it is, ultimately, nihilistic and corrosive. Nevertheless, I would rather have nihilistic British humour than po-faced American dumbness as exemplified by most TV Sci-Fi from across the Atlantic.

On the subject of TV Sci-Fi, Evelyn Lewes's columns seem to have attracted a disproportionate number of letters, far too many of which appear to be from "trainspotters." Who cares about the correct spellings of various stupid characters' names or nitpicking about the minutiae of plot details when the plots themselves are often inconsistent within programmes (let alone between programmes) and rarely make any sense?

Of course I would not like to denigrate all of your correspondents as "trainspotters"; Joe Parchelo's letter in *IZ* 173, for example, was very interesting. Mr Parchelo's main thesis, that, in a visual medium, it is difficult to introduce initial ambiguities so that the viewer has the pleasure of eventually resolving them (as a reader of sf texts would have) has some merit but is just a little bit too contrived for me. I think that the main reason that TV Sci-Fi is incompatible with and antithetical to written sf is because it is dumb!

When I was a teenager, back in the '60s, I steeped myself in the works of writers such as Heinlein, Anderson, Clarke, Bester, Knight *et al.* and these writers seemed to me, at the time, to be smart (at least smarter than I was!). They widened my horizons and introduced me to a colourful and limitless universe with endless possibilities for novelty, conflict and adventure. When the *Star Trek* series was first announced (no, I'm not going to look up the exact year on a website) I was delighted. Here was the possibility that I might experience, from the television, some of the excitement that I derived from written sf. I can still remember the disappointment when I finally caught the first episode – *Star Trek* was boring and stupid! The whole show seemed to be built around the contrived and tedious conflicts between the various unconvincing characters. I soon realized that this was just another soap opera and I remember referring to it as, "Peyton Place in Outer Space" (after a dire American soap opera of the time, starring Mia Farrow).

I recall that David Pringle made the link between TV Sci-Fi and soap opera, a couple of years ago, in this magazine.

Contemporary TV Sci-Fi shows seem to be just more of the same – in fact, if anything, the soap opera elements now seem to have taken over completely. Whilst channel hopping the other day I caught an episode of *Farstarbabylrek* (or whatever it is called). The plot was incomprehensible but seemed to involve the characters running around, shouting at each other (contrived conflict) whilst pointing various fatuous "weapons" at other characters. The aliens seemed to have been developed by asking a high-school sports jock and his new-agey girlfriend to describe a Japanese person (hey, Japan's really cool – they have martial arts and *feng shui* and stuff) and then gluing lots of latex bumps on to the result. The science in the programme seemed to be derived from *The National Enquirer* science page ("Elvis clone found in wormhole!"). I also believe that one character seemed to think that a "micron" was a unit of time and then compounded the error by instructing another character to "wait for x microns." Probably, if I had consulted the programme's website, I would have found that the character was using the word "mucron" which is a unit of time used on the planet Splurge...

When I experience sf, in any medium, I don't necessarily want "cognitive estrangement" (if that is what Mr Parchelo is referring to) but I do want to be able to suspend my disbelief. To do that I need to be confident that the people producing the sf are better informed about the world, current knowledge of the universe and human relationships than, at least, my teenaged self was, and, preferably, my adult self is. Furthermore I expect at least an attempt to be made to examine what happens to the human relationships when they are projected into a milieu other than contemporary California.

D. G. Bishop

A Retraction

Dear Editors:

It seems that I have to take back my critique on "The Suspect Genome" by Peter F. Hamilton (*IZ* 156), i.e. that reading someone's facial characteristics from a DNA sample is incredible, as Matthew W. Nash (*IZ* 173) noted. He found a website where the probability of predicting such characteristics is being investigated. I read in a recent article in *New Scientist* (10 Nov. 2001) that tests using DNA samples to predict eye colour as well as hair colour are "just around the corner." Perhaps Hamilton's ideas were not so far-fetched at all!

Marlies Vaz Nunes

Barkelsby, Germany
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Letters for publication should be e-mailed to interzone@cix.co.uk – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.

Medical Advice

Dear Editors:

I only received the September issue a few days ago, and haven't yet received the October. Very strange for it to take this long; I can only guess that it might have something to do with handling of mail from other countries since September 11 and the anthrax incidents. [Editor: That's right. Post from overseas to the USA was particularly badly delayed during the last three months of 2001, although some other countries seem to have been affected too.]

I haven't finished *IZ* 171 yet, but I wanted to comment on the plight of your letter-writer Joe Parchelo ("I'm Obsessed and It's All Your Fault!"). We do indeed live in a world of abundance, not only of material goods but of literature, art, ideas, music, hobbies, you-name-it. We are lucky beyond belief, as I am reminded every day when I watch the news. I too have a stack of books to read almost as tall as I am (5' 5"), and a stack of magazines that reaches above the knee. I am 52 years old and am determined to live as long as possible in order to read as much as possible. In order to achieve that goal, I plan the following:

1. Take care of my health, eat right, and exercise regularly.
2. Go to the eye doctor regularly and be tested for glaucoma and other diseases of aging. I'm not joking about this. Glaucoma can sneak up on you; progression of the disease can be delayed with treatment, but lost sight can't usually be restored.

That's my public service announcement for the day. Other than that, I simply rejoice for all of us, that we have *IZ* and a wealth of other outstanding reading material that we can't live long enough to get to.

Martha A. Hood

Irvine, California

Mahood49@aol.com

Points for Consideration

Dear Editors:

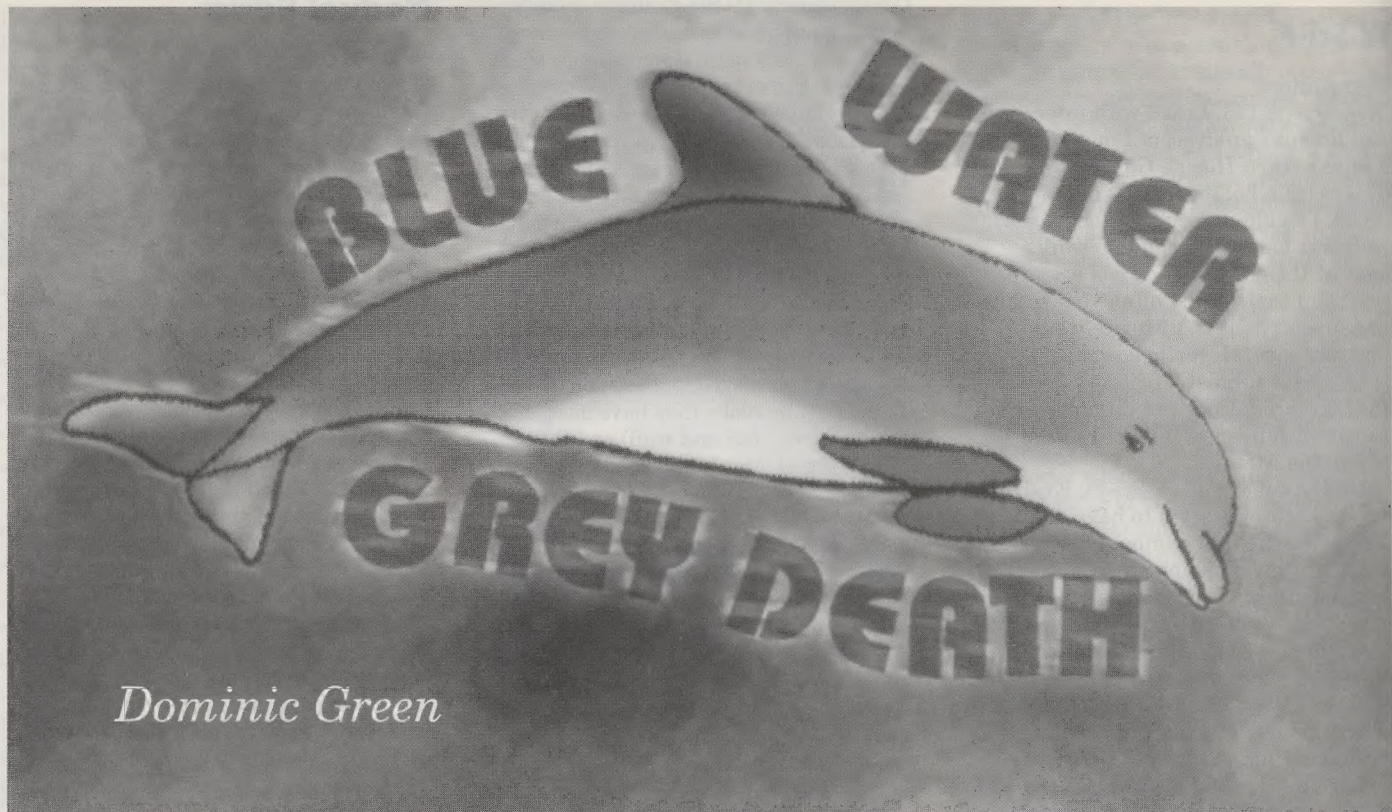
Some comments on the November issue.

Page 4, reference to 11 September – I am still getting over the shock of discovering that's the date I chose at the opening of *Rendezvous with Rama* for the worst disaster in human history. Heaven knows why I chose it back in '73 – I've just written an article about the coincidence (?) which I've sent to my agents.

Planet of the Apes – I'll always remember seeing the second episode in a New York cinema soon after it came out. In a famous scene, Charlton Heston stands in the ruins of the New York Subway and cries despairingly: "Who could have done this?" A voice from the audience replied: "Mayor Lindsay!" Of course that brought the house down...

Sir Arthur C. Clarke

Sri Lanka



Dominic Green

First of all, I'd like to make it clear that I offer no excuses; we simply shouldn't have been there. There had been weather warnings; there'd been warnings from Her Majesty's Government, the State Department, and the Peruvian coastguard itself that anyone violating Peruvian territorial waters would be fired upon. There'd been warnings about radar and sonar and Global Positioning satellites falling bleeping from the sky during the Minnellium Weekend. There had even been ice warnings, only a few hundred miles south of us; a big piece of Antarctica the size of Norfolk had calved into smaller bergs maybe the size of Middlesex and Surrey that were now drifting north on the Humboldt Current – melting fast, of course, but still I'd mentioned the last bit to Dean, and he'd laughed and popped open a beer and said it didn't matter, at that rate they'd only be the size of Tooting by the time they hit us.

Granted, we'd heard the Peruvian navy had all seven of its coastal patrol boats in dock during the weekend, in case their weapons systems suddenly caught the Minnellium Bug and inadvertently reformatted the Chilean coast. And if their ships were in harbour, their radars were likewise in harbour, making this a splendid time for folk like us to put to sea. In any case, we'd chosen the *Bernardo O'Higgins* for radar-invisibility – she was effectively a river barge, after all, carvel-built on an iron skeleton. We'd chugged across the harbour in her in Valparaiso, and her freeboard was so low the radar on board our business associate's yacht hadn't registered so much as a heavy swell in our direction.

That freeboard was giving me cause for concern now. The waves were tiny, pathetically small, scarcely fit to overturn a pedalo on a boating lake, but *Bernardo O'Higgins* was over one hundred feet long and stiff as the

whiskies Dean was currently pouring down himself. She wasn't built to bend, and one hundred feet of ocean can bend a hull like a bow. The engines we'd had installed were river engines. They were up out of the water at the top of every wave – those little, playful waves that might make you cold and wet and a little bit afraid if they hit you while you were standing up paddling at the beach up to your pink little knees in water.

Except that we weren't up to our knees in water. At our current position, of which I had to admit I wasn't entirely sure, a continent could have lain drowned beneath us, and we would have noticed no change in the height of the swell.

Dean had pronounced himself to be unworried, and, had there been a Below, he would have gone there. He had reasoned that we had nothing to fear until we approached shallow water, where the waves would be higher and the bottom a more immediate problem. I had been able to see his point of view. After all, at our current rate of progress, he had over twelve hours to sober up before we really started running into some serious South America.

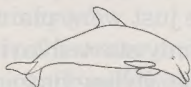
I'd sailed boats before on courses in the Army. I'd considered myself to be fairly nautically competent. I could plot a course, tie a sheepshank, use a radio, GPS and compass – even guess the depths of the tides right two times out of three. I'd not considered an overgrown river barge to be much of a challenge. And it wouldn't have been – not if I'd been trying to sail it up a river.

Dean suffered from the same disease as I did – that arrogant belief in your own indestructibility that the Forces insist on instilling into you. Dean had it worse than I did, and like a fool, I'd believed him. I'd been quite willing to believe that, being an ex-Marine, he'd naturally be the superior seaman, having had access to all that

extra naval training.

In any case, the water was pushing at our rails like surface tension round a fly's legs, and we had no pumps. Pumps, like many other things, are the first thing you think of when you suddenly realize you are about to badly need them. *Bernardo O'Higgins* had no pumps. Why should she need pumps? She was a river boat. A pump could be had anywhere up the Bio Bio simply by wandering into a local marine supplier's and borrowing theirs. To make matters worse, the Cargo was unstable.

The Cargo would have been unstable no matter how it had been shipped; that sort of thing simply cannot be stored safely. We'd tried as best we could, of course, and done quite well as I recall – that was, after all, what we were good at, what we were trained to do. The detonators were in a quiet room of their own at the other end of the ship from the charges, and the heavy metal was all stowed amidships to centralize the weight in the event of a swell. It was the heavy metal, of course, that was our downfall. Dean had insisted on fulfilling our Peruvian associates' requirements to the letter, and this had included the tired old pair of ex-Soviet, ex-Angolan PT-76 swimming tanks that he'd been sold by a man in a pub in Santiago. In retrospect, we'd probably have done better loading all the arms and equipment into one of the tanks, putting up the stabilizer fin and attempting to *drive* off to Ilo.



In the event, though, I woke Dean, and he swore and sobered a great deal, and we spent several minutes shouting and cursing at each other on deck and reminding each other what our business associates in Santiago and the *Cordillera Oriental* were likely to do to us if we proved incapable of delivering the goods. After this there followed several minutes dashing and splashing around the deck searching for concave items to bale with, followed by a couple of minutes of dread realization that a hundred-foot barge filling with water fast was not likely to be baled effectively by two men using Chilean Army Surplus helmets, followed by 30 seconds more of Dean convincing me at the point of a gun he suddenly proved to have that sending out a distress signal to the Peruvian Navy was not a good idea.

Besides, how could they help us? There was probably not a vessel within a hundred miles, and the water was by now making the vessel feel noticeably more a part of the ocean. It is quite terrifying how quickly a boat can go down under the weight of tonnes of water pouring over her sides.

Luckily for us, we hadn't neglected to bring *one* essential item of marine safety equipment, which was a single duffel-bag-shaped thingy the size of an oil drum, produced by the A-1 Life Raft Company of, oddly enough, Omaha, Nebraska. What use they have for life-rafts in Omaha I have no idea, but I can testify that their products are excellent. The thing inflated in seconds to the size of a small family igloo. It had flares. It had a paddle. It had a radio direction-finder which Dean immediately located and helpfully smashed. It had the emergency rations we had forgotten to bring. About the only lifetime

essential it didn't have was Cable TV and a year's supply of pornography, and I looked hard for those in full expectation of their presence. Oh, the disappointment.

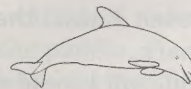
Dean assured me, as we climbed into the thing, that the current – the Humboldt Current, which, he proudly informed me, flowed straight here out of Antarctica – would do the job of Peruvian Air Sea Rescue and deposit us safely on the Pacific slopes of the *Cordillera Occidental* within days. Days were good. I'd examined our food supplies. Weeks, now – weeks would not be so hot.

We paddled away from the sinking *Bernardo* fast; we'd both heard the stories about big sinking vessels dragging small swimming sailors down with them. As we paddled, I became acutely conscious of how Antarctic this wonderful water we were paddling in really was. There was an air space in the bottom of the life-raft, but somehow, wherever you sat on the rubber, the heat seemed to leach out of you into the sea you could feel beneath. And this, mark you, on a hot sunny day in a tropical latitude.

After a second argument with Dave, his pistol fell over the side and he acquired a number of heavy bruises to the face. We decided, after a brief debating session involving mutual strangulation, that we could best speed our progress towards the Peruvian coastline by continuing to use the paddle provided. As there was only one paddle, one man would paddle at any one time, and one would rest. We had also been provided with a compass, and considered ourselves familiar enough with the constellations to navigate by the stars. We would sleep in the day, when it was warm, and we would work in the night, when it was certain to be cold. Whatever wind there was seemed also to be blowing out of Antarctica, or piling down from the high slopes of the Andes. We would paddle slightly to the east of north, to prevent ourselves being swept clean across the Peruvian and Ecuadorean coastlines in the big whirlpool where the Humboldt Current feeds into the Equatorial.

As the man with the paddle thereby had the boat's only heavy blunt instrument, the resting man would have the flare gun by his side. We were confident that, with a fair wind in a non-*Niño* year, and a spirit of manly co-operation, we would both be leaping ashore with the greater part of our supplies still unconsumed inside a couple of days.

What I'm basically saying is that you shouldn't feel too sorry for us. We were criminals transporting things other criminals could use to kill people. But we never advertised the fact. For all anyone on or in the sea that night knew, we could have been plain ordinary seafarers. Perhaps plain ordinary seafarers like you.



The first attack came after dark, when our eyes didn't work any longer, and theirs still did.

I couldn't sleep for fear of Dean suddenly producing some Soldier of Fortune derringer from out of his anus and plugging me in the eye with a cross-cut .22. I knew I shouldn't sleep in any case; we had planned to sleep in the daytime. But I was nodding, just beginning to drift away towards a South America populated with willing,

large-breasted *mestizo* *senoritas* wearing nothing but felt bowler hats and cowboy boots, when I heard Dean saying in a voice of some urgency:

"There's something underneath the boat."

"This isn't a boat. It's a raft," I corrected, and rolled over again to sleep.

"No, I mean it. Something just nudged the fabric."

My first impression was sharks. Sharks bump things with their noses to smell them before closing in for the kill. And the sort of sharks we were likely to encounter in these waters were not the sort you encounter at Hunstanton Seaworld. Sharks had teeth that could rip the walls of an inflatable like sausage skins. But I remembered reading somewhere that, if they couldn't smell anything like food when they bumped you with their snouts, they'd reason that you were skin all the way through with no sausage on the inside.

"Keep your hand out of the water," I said. "Maybe it'll go away."

Dean had evidently read the same books I had. He'd not had his hand anywhere near the water, but he moved it as far away from the water as it would go. We huddled in the geometric centre of the raft, facing outwards. Suddenly, we were on the same side again.

Something moved past the raft. Something big. The entire raft rotated slowly in its backwash. Then, something punched into the bottom of the raft again, directly underneath the pair of us. Whatever it was, it hit hard (I remember, later, rubbing a bruise the size of a Nicotinel), and it communicated through the equivalent of a gymnasium punchbag. It knocked us into opposite corners of the boat, and we sat there looking at each other.

"It ain't going away," said Dean, and then:

"Course, *someone* threw my automatic overboard, didn't they?"

"Killing sharks only attracts other sharks," I said defensively.

He opened the flap of the tent ceiling and peered out into the dark, seeing nothing but fog. We had seen nothing but fog since nightfall; the ocean had suddenly seemed to merge with the sky, and breathing the air felt only a little less wet than drowning. Even inside the raft, it was wet and cold.

"A fin!" said Dean. "I saw a fin!"

I should have guessed at that point, of course. Sharks don't have a fin. They have two or three, the dorsal, the soft dorsal, the caudal, and so on. Although the dorsal fin is liable to be the one that rides up clear of the water, the soft dorsal and caudal should also be visible if you look hard enough. Whatever it was, then, we should have known it wasn't a shark.

However, at the time, all I could say was, "How big?"

"Foot high at least. Sort of sickle-shaped. Rising and falling in the water."

That, too, should have told us something. But it didn't. Instead, we persisted in the shark theory. We'd seen all the movies, you see.

"Get back inside. And maybe we shouldn't be yelling at each other. It attracts sharks."

"I'm not yelling," he yelled.

"Okay, you're not yelling. Let's just keep quiet and hope it swims away."

"It," he said with an ominous voice, "could be a *they*."

He leaned over the edge of the raft, paddle in hand, held blade-on like an axe.

"If you hit them hard on the nose it scares them away," he said.

"Some people reckon splashing and hitting *attracts* them. Come away from the side. You're casting a shadow into the water."

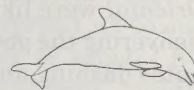
"Fuck that! It knew just what part of the raft to bump, right under our arses. It *knows we're here*."

Something moved past the raft again, and Dean lunged forward, nearly knocking himself clean overboard. I saw a vague streak of dull white rolling away from the paddle.

"Never mind hit it hard on the nose – I'll hit it hard in the fucking *balls* if I can find them—" He was still leaning far out of the raft, so much so that I had to lean back hard into my side to stop us overturning. He turned round suddenly with a questioning expression. "Do fish have balls? Where are you, fucking Jaws? Come out and fucking fight!"

His voice trailed off into nothing. The gentle sucking of the water against the raft walls was all the answer he got.

Maybe he saw something moving in the waves that I missed, or maybe he just went plain apeshit. Whatever the reason, he suddenly started laying about him in the water with the paddle, yelling fit to attract sharks, giant squid and man-eating tigers alike. Then, with a speed that would have been comical if I hadn't been terrified, he belly-flopped into the ocean as if he were going in to fight the monsters in their own back yard.



For a second or two, he didn't surface. I sat in the raft consternated. Surely even Dean wasn't that daft. He *had* dived in, hadn't he?

Or had something *pulled* him in?

Then he bounced to the surface in his flotation vest, coughed, and vomited onto (and into) the raft. *Nice one, Dean*, I thought. He sat there, hanging on the edge of the rubber, not even bothering to pull himself in out of the water, oblivious of the fact that his legs were waving temptingly like tasty morsels under us, gulping in air like a steam engine.

"It grabbed the paddle," he said, incredulously. "Nearly had me too. Lucky I got away. Help me – help me up."

I helped him up, and made sure he sat in his own pool of vomit once he was up. Only seconds earlier, I had considered the raft to be a bleak and inhospitable environment. Now I remembered it as a snug warm cave that Dave had spoiled by floundering his dripping way back into it. He seemed somehow on his short trip in the sea to have absorbed a bigger volume of freezing cold water than his body could have contained blood. I wondered idly, watching him with the flare gun in my hand, how many pints of blood his body *did* contain.

He got up, shook himself like a dog – showering me

with salt water in the process – and yelled jubilantly, “Fucking daft bastard! Picked the wrong thing to bite!”

Then something shot up out of the water like a javelin, narrowly missing the tip of Dean’s nose. Had it hit, it would have made an entry wound out of one of his nostrils and given him an impromptu blowhole where a Hindu has his prayer mark.

It dropped back to the water, and floated. It was a paddle. It was *our* paddle.

“Bastard!” said Dean feelingly. “Bastard gave it back.”

“Maybe he’s figured out the *right* thing to bite now,” I said. Dean glared at me, then once again made the sea the object of his glaring.

“We got to have it,” he said. “I can just about reach it.”

“You just about got yourself pulled in last time.”

This made him think twice. He sat back into the raft, spreading the puke about.

I looked past him at the paddle hopefully. “Maybe it’ll float closer.”

We stared at it, trying to make it come to us by a collective act of will. Sure enough, it began to bob gently further and further out of reach.

“I could hook it if I had the flare gun,” he said, looking at the flare gun hungrily. I held the flare gun close to my chest and shook my head.

He shrugged. “Fuck you, then. If it bites me arms off, it’ll find out I taste nasty.”

He put his arms in the water and started paddling. All I could do was shrink back into the plastic and think, *From underneath, we must look like some big juicy sea turtle*. I was expecting to see a vast triangular head rise from the deep and pluck him out of the bows in a shower of blood, but no such thing occurred. Instead, we actually seemed to be getting closer and closer to the fallen paddle.

Then a fin drifted past, grey as dead flesh, through an opening in the fog maybe 30 or 40 yards away. Dean saw it too, and its comparative distance spurred him on to even greater feats of shark-attraction.

“Nearly there!” he said. “Lima here we come—”

The paddle turned out of the water like a juggling club. This time, it caught Dean across the nose, drawing blood. I wasn’t quite sure whether his nose had been broken. The paddle fell back onto the swell with a splash – then, suddenly, a pair of grey tailfins wafted out of a wave-trough beneath it and batted it up into the air again. It took a long while to come down, and the splash that it made when it did was a mere whisper. I whipped my head round to catch sight of it and eventually located it as a slightly whiter patch of grey bobbing in the fog.

Not tailfins, I reminded myself. *Flukes*.

“Dolphins,” I said, more for my own benefit than anyone else’s. “They’re fucking dolphins.”

“Don’t be bloody ridiculous. Dolphins don’t attack people.”

A fiendish tittering answered him out of the fog.

I shook my head. “They’re not attacking people. They’re just playing.” My voice tailed off, and was quite small by the time I got round to saying:

“Aren’t they?”

We looked at each other. Dean nodded.

“All we’ve got to do is paddle towards the thing. They’ll,

they’ll let us have it, eventually.”

I nodded back at Dean. Yes, we were absolutely sure of this.

In any case, it was certainly a relief for me that we were only facing fellow mammals, rather than sharks.

Cautiously, Dean knelt down in the front of the raft – insofar as it had a front – and put his forearms in the water. Paddling the raft by hand was more difficult than paddling it with the manufacturer’s prescribed item, and our progress towards the paddle was slow.

This time, they let us get within a metre of the paddle. Then the tail flukes whipped out of the water again and slapped the paddle high into the air. The thing must be flying as high as an artillery shell, or maybe it had just made such a quiet splash coming down that I had simply not heard it –

The paddle skimmed across the water in front of the raft, as if travelling under its own steam. Again, the ghoulish tittering.

“So, you can catch stuff on your nose, can you?” said Dean. “*Clever* dolphin. Come to papa. Pa Love Fa.”

The dolphin refused to come to papa. It was a big dolphin too, nine or even ten feet long. The paddle dropped in the water, then flew out of it again like a rugby ball, spinning in the air for all the world as if its kicker had turned it to give it more aerodynamic stability.

There was a distant splash.

“It’s come down over there. It’s not more than ten yards,” said Dave, pointing excitedly.

“Don’t bother,” I said, sinking back into the raft.

“Whaddyou mean, *don’t bother*? We need that thing to get to Peru!”

“If you think we can paddle our way a hundred miles across the Pacific Ocean with something even a punt hire company would only include as an optional accessory, you’re dimmer than I think you are. We were only using it to try and correct our course anyway. Besides,” I said, staring out into the gloom, “that’s what they *want* us to do.”

“They?” He stared out after me. “There’s more than *one* of them?”

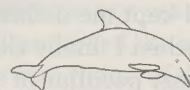
“One of them lured you out after the paddle while the other one came up underneath. I’d say *at least* two of them.” I slumped in my seat on the polythene or polypropylene or whatever, and said bitterly:

“They’re having a bit of fun with us.”

He squinted into the dark. “So we sit tight here and wait, right?”

I nodded. “Agreed. Like friendly puppy wanting to play ball. You don’t throw the ball, it don’t bring the ball back. We don’t go after the paddle...”

“...maybe they leave the paddle alone.” He continued to a second, even more satisfactory conclusion. “Maybe they leave *us* alone.”



They waited for us, out there in the dark. I could hear them waiting.

Then there was a pair of splashes, as if two sets of eyes

that had been up top watching us had dived beneath the surface.

"It's so close," said Dean, staring at the paddle like a hypnotic subject at a watch. "Maybe, now they've swum away —"

"No," I said, firmly, and he nodded, still staring.

Another pair of spyhopping splashes made themselves heard 20 yards to either side of us in the fog. The fog cackled to itself in sonar.

"See," I said. "They haven't gone away."

He nodded again. We didn't go after the paddle.

There were two gentle submerging splashes. Then nothing but fog, drifting.

"Can't see any fins," said Dean, trying hard to keep himself completely inside the raft and look outside it at the same time.

"They must be under the surface," I said. "They can stay down there as long as they like, probably."

"They're not really fish at all, you know" said Dean, sharing his depth of zoological knowledge with me. I stared at him hard, which discouraged him from sharing anything further for a few seconds; but then the silence was obviously too much for him to bear.

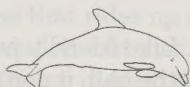
"Anyway," said Dean, "they can't hurt the raft. They ain't got teeth sharp enough. I seen their teeth. Like pegs, not razors. Made for eating fish." He paused for thought a moment. "Like Killer Whales. Killer Whales got teeth like that as well —"

I looked at him. He didn't shut up, though, but carried on with a horrified expression as though his brain couldn't stop stuff coming out of his mouth unbidden.

"— Killer whales eat penguins, seals and penguins, and they're members of the dolphin family, the Killer Whales not the seals and penguins, mind, and when a penguin or a seal is, like, *basking*, on an ice floe, the Killer Whale, he'll come up under the ice floe and butt it with his head and turn it over —"

We looked at each other with the expressions of men who each know exactly what the other is thinking.

Then the impact happened. It happened at Dean's end of the raft. His whole end of the structure seemed to fly up into the air, and I felt as if I'd been punched in the gut, and suddenly my whole end of the structure was full of a family-hatchback-sized volume of water, and it was *freezing*, and my face kept going over and under the water, and I saw nothing but bright red rubber and bubbles, and tasted nothing but salt.



I was almost instantly unable to feel my fingers and toes. Luckily the lifejacket, fully inflated, carried me to the surface. I kicked and coughed and spluttered and did my best to drown, but the air collar round my neck wasn't having any of it and kept me defiantly afloat.

What I could see, when I finally cleared the water from my eyes, was the most peculiar of sights. Without two human beings inside it, the raft was virtually weightless, and it was being butted and batted around the sea by invisible assailants for all the world as if it had been a

giant beachball supplied for the creatures' sole amusement. It was already leaking air, I noticed, and becoming heavier in the water with each dolphin-buffet.

It's playing, I thought, feeling the utmost contempt for the creatures as I thought it. *That's our lifeboat you're throwing around there, fishface. You're playing us to death.*

It was then that I realized that there should have been a second lifejacket in the water. For all Dean's density, his flotation vest had been just as properly inflated as mine.

I spun myself round in the water, disregarding the stupid dolphin playing with the remnants of the raft. Maybe Dean was floating somewhere out in the fog, kicking himself round in a circle just like I was.

I shouted out "Dean!" a couple of times. It could do no harm. The finny bastards out there knew damn well where I was. I didn't need to splash and shout and bleed for them to smell me out.

Visibility wasn't *that* bad. Maybe he'd been thrown a long way clear of the raft when it overturned, though. Maybe he was still trapped in the bits of the raft the dolphin was playing with. It *was* a dolphin, wasn't it? I hadn't had a good look at it, but I was pretty sure it had been a dolphin. Horizontal tail flukes and all—

The raft had stopped dancing around on the water being twatted by invisible attackers. Now it began to sink. Maybe, I thought, if I could just swim to it, it might still have enough air in it for me to —

At that moment, Dean broke surface.

They had taken him deep. When he rose, he shot out of the water like some weird burial at sea fired from a Polaris tube, arms flailing as if to catch hold of the living, and I shrank back into my lifejacket without thinking. The pressure had burst the blood vessels in his eyes and ears, and four trickles of blood sobbed from his senses. The lifejacket was wrapped around his neck in tatters, and it must have only been the last precious breath of air he'd hoarded in his lungs for so long that had floated him to the surface. I'd heard tell that men who held their breath for too long under heavy pressure didn't die from gulping any water, but from haemorrhages in their lungs resulting from the terrific strain of clamping their pharynx shut for so long.

Whatever the reason for it, however, he was most certainly, definitely, dead. Two of the reasons for it were circling me now, chirruping like bad little birds in the springtime, long as crocodiles and a hundred times as cunning. They were dolphins. From a number of scholarly sources consulted since, I can say that one of them, the larger one, was an Atlantic Bottle-Nosed Dolphin, and the other was a *Delphinus Delphis*.

The last scraps of the raft were sinking.

"So there were only ever two of you after all," I said. I wouldn't have been surprised if they could understand me. "What did he do to you — hit you with the paddle by accident?"

But I knew in my heart of hearts that there had been no accident with the paddle. This wasn't vengeance. This was *sport*.

"When you hole-headed bastards beach up on *our* world because you're too daft to see the beach in time, we take

pity on you and push you back in before the dogs eat you!" I yelled. "I SUPPOSE YOU THINK THIS IS CLEVER!"

One of them rose from the water, tilted its head up and jabbered in dolphinese. If I hadn't known I was unreasonably applying humanoid characteristics to animals, I would have sworn that it was laughing. Then, it rose from the sea on a thrashing tail, kicking water in my face, king of this particular Muscle Beach, and *walked on the water* away from me, still jabbering, before falling into the water somewhat gracelessly around ten or twelve yards away.

"Haha, you fucked up on that last bit," I said, picking faults.

Two dolphin heads rose from the water and commenced cackling again. The series of bleeps and clicks they made seemed to be louder, sharper and more urgent this time, though.

Then they upended themselves in two wheeling blurs of greyness, and were gone.



I waited as stoically as possible for two mouths on the end of three-yard torpedoes of muscle to grab me round the ankles and power me down into the depths. I waited for a very long time. This didn't fool me any, as I knew that making me wait was part of the game, and that they would be sure to come for me as soon as I thought I had miraculously escaped.

Then I saw the fin coming towards me.

It wasn't coming towards me as much as towards the life-raft, maybe. Perhaps Dean, in bashing the water so enthusiastically with his paddle, had attracted it as I'd warned him he would. The fin was moving in lazy, wavy bursts as a half-submerged caudal fin flicked it through the ocean. A tailfin positioned vertically in the water.

The dorsal was at least two feet high, and there was probably more of it under the waterline. Beneath all of it, a huge, ghost-white mass filled all of my observable world. It was a shark, the biggest shark I had ever seen, certainly the biggest I will ever see. It had the unmistakable bullet head and the dead black eyes, like silver coins corroding in some seabed wreck, of *Charcharodon Charcharias*, the Great White; one of the few sharks known to prey on mammals for a living. It swept past me, and I felt three tonnes or more of seawater move aside to give it room. It was shaking its head from side to side, like a big dog worrying a bone – or casting about to get a scent. Gillslits the size of jet intakes cruised past, gently pulsating in the shark-made current. A small pilot fish hurried past my elbow.

It wasn't worried about me. It had bigger fish to fry, and I suspected those fish Weren't Really Fish At All. Nor did it appear to be in any extreme hurry as its bulk slid into the deep.



The rest, maybe, you know from TV and the newspapers. Dean, it transpired, had not been as conscientious as he'd thought in his radio-smashing activities, and had suc-

ceeded chiefly in breaking a jigger inside the radio that, when broken, activated a distress beacon. The Peruvian Navy had been more efficient during the Minnellium period than we had either anticipated or, in our recent circumstances, dared hope, and they had dispatched a coast-guard vessel to pick up survivors. I claimed in broken Spanish that we had been carrying "contraband British Beef," which resulted in hearty claps on the back and Moo-Moo-LoCo jokes in broken English all round, and was treated to hot soup, medical attention, and a lengthy stay in hospital being ministered to by sleek *mestizo* nurses (alas, clothed nurses without poncho, *sans* top hat) when we reached port in Callao. It was only when their patient first refused to travel back to England through air or over water that my hosts even so much as raised an eyebrow.

I took a train from Lima all the way to Lebanon, Kansas – a twelve-day train that would make a hardened traveller sweat – and didn't once so much as take the name of my God in vain until we passed over the Panama Canal, through which sea creatures have been known to swim, and where the sea was even visible, occasionally, between moving buildings. I have been thinking hard about flying home to England since my arrival here, but England is an island, really not very high above water in the final analysis, and I kid myself I have good reason not to move back home because global warming is already devaluing waterfront properties along the Cornish Riviera. Some days I think more of Colorado or British Columbia as decent long-term property investments. Lebanon itself is not unattractive, and two miles from the geometric exact centre of the Continental United States, which makes it a tourist mecca for geographical purists.

Since the *Bernardo* went down, I've been spending a great deal of time in the Lebanon Public Library. I have been looking at statistics. Due to the unreliability of a great number of accounts dating from earlier years, I have restricted my statistical activities to data collected in the last half century. I have uncovered 207 verifiable accounts of attacks by sharks on humans in that period. Also in that period, I have unearthed 302 accounts of swimmers and seamen being injured by "playful dolphin high spirits." Now, bear in mind, please, that victims of shark attacks normally survive. The sharks bite them, realize in their dimmest of dim brains that they are not actually fish, seals, turtles, discarded tampons or any one of the million and one things a shark can eat and enjoy digesting, spit them out, and swim away again looking for something tasting a little less of Calvin Klein. I've compared the incidence of death or serious injury on my two lists, and discovered that there is little difference. The dolphins are only slightly in the lead.

And what about those cases we *don't* know about? What about the thousand-odd cases of drowning and shark and snake and jellyfish attack that must get written off as such by oh-so-clever coroners every year? Sharks are clumsy killers, the teenage burglars of the man-eating profession. They leave the exact bite radius of their mouths fixed into the bodies of their victims, sometimes even going so far as to obligingly leave their teeth in the wound. But some creatures in the sea are not so considerate. A dolphin's body is

a nine-foot-long, 500-pound blunt instrument, and after that instrument has been used it simply swims away on the end of its owner. A dolphin victim could just as easily have been hit on the head by a swinging boom, or tapped by a mugger and thrown off the end of a pier.

Sharks are honest creatures. They take the occasional bite out of a human because they feel we might be good to eat. They are forced into man-eating by circumstance – they have mouths to feed, namely theirs. If a shark attacks a person, pieces of that person will show up in his stomach upon autopsy up to six months later – shark digestion proceeds very slowly. But dolphins are clever enough not to get caught with bits of fisherman in their stomachs. We are told that this means that dolphins do not ever, under any circumstances, attack humans. Wrong. What this means, as Dean and I discovered, is that dolphins do not attack humans for food. Like humans, they attack humans for fun.

Anyone who has watched nature programmes has seen killer whales batting baby sealions about in the sea like footballs, or letting them loose to think they've escaped before scooping them up in their jaws again. Animals are as capable of sadism as we are, and there is little difference in size or ability to fight back between a baby sealion and a baby human. The only reason why men don't see orcas playing ball with babies, then, is because men tend to carry cameras and go to fetch other men carrying harpoons.

Throughout all previous centuries, the grampus was considered to be a killer. You don't get a name like Killer Whale for nothing. Even Melville, though he respected their intelligence, treated the big black and white bastards with caution. And yet, this century, suddenly *Orcinus Orca* has become the friendly ambling panda of the sea, doing all but take up nibbling bamboo to convince humanity of his peaceful nature. Man likes to think that he understands things better now, and that his forefathers were illiterate scumsuckers who would have harpooned Barney the Friendly Dinosaur if he'd broken water in front of their boats. But is this the case, or have the odontocetes merely cleaned up their acts? For the last 50 years, we've been told Killer Whales are merely big cuddly dolphins in evening dress. Surely, then, the reverse is equally true. Dolphins are small grey killers. Just ask any fish. But sharks don't have the charisma dolphins do. Sharks can't balance balls on their noses, or jump through hoops, or save drowning sailors in full view of cameramen from the *National Geographic*. And there's that dolphin smile, too, a purely random trick of evolution that hardcoded the shape of the delphinoid head into the biggest, friendliest clownlike grin in the epipelagic layer. True, sharks have smiles too, but they tend to be a tad too toothy for human tastes. And above all, dolphins are mammals, just like us, just like friendly cats and dogs and Champion the Wonder Horse.

I need hardly remind my readership that Charlie Manson and Shoko Asahara are also mammals.

And what happens when the cameras aren't rolling? What happens when Flipper and Free Willy know that whoever is up there is up there alone, and cold, and scared? The only reason why shark attacks loom large in

the popular imagination is that shark-attack victims *usually get away*. Creatures with an intelligence approximating that of a human being, meanwhile, do not make such stupid mistakes. Think a moment – do dolphins have any honest *reason* to be stupidly nice to human beings? How many dolphins does the Japanese whaling industry spear and gut a year? And how many captured dolphins still live penned in little blue cubes of salt water at Marineland and Sea World and a thousand other, less reputable places? Of course, we're learning now that this is cruel, and releasing the poor twittering darlings back into the sea. Can't anyone see that this is just compounding our error? The more of their fellows get released back to them, the more intelligence they gather. My Atlantic Bottle-Nose was a long way from home in the Humboldt Current off Chile. Maybe he'd been released into the wild by some well-meaning animal rights group or other – I'm convinced that that walk-on-water trick is a thing only a dolphin from captivity would know. I happen to know that a dolphin called Jesus, formerly of the Santiago Marine Aquarium, had been released along that coastline only six months previously, and the "Galilee Walk" had apparently been one of his specialties.

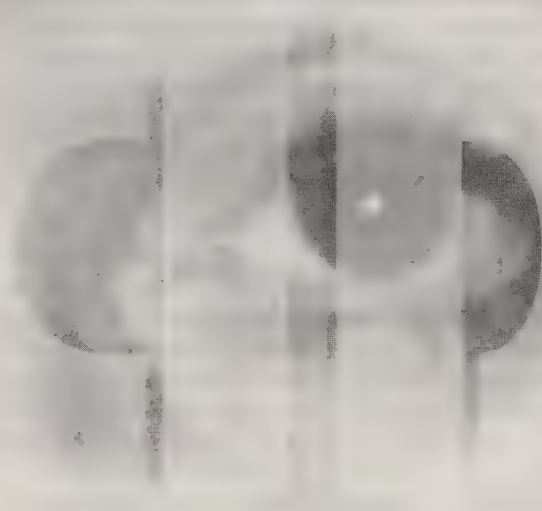
People think of the sea in terms of it being Three Times the Area of the Land. This is, of course, true, but it's simplistic. The sea should be thought of in terms of a forest, six miles high, with different faunal and floral taxa inhabiting each new layer of the canopy. The toothed whales harvest almost every single one of those layers. We, on the other hand, live off an inch-thick layer of humus spread over the face of the Earth's land masses. If that layer died, we too would die.

They have more resources than we do. And they have almost certainly been around for longer. The first porpoise, a thing called *Kentriodon*, evolved in the late Miocene ten million years or so ago, and it *already* had a brain larger than ours. Against these geological eras of accumulated cunning, we can muster... opposed thumbs.

I no longer go to dolphinariums. I shudder while watching the Wildlife channel, except during shocking exposés of the whaling industry. If I see anyone eating shark's fin soup in a restaurant, meanwhile, I knock the spoon from his hand and lecture him about the majesty and hundred-million-year pedigree of these unjustly maligned creatures. At least, I try to, while I'm being propelled towards the door. Then I go home, sigh, look in the refrigerator, and pop open a tin of *geiniku* or *spekk* with my opposed thumb. You'd be surprised how good whale blubber tastes.



Dominic Green lives in Northampton, and works in computing. His last several stories here – all, in varying degrees, humorous and/or satirical – were "Something Chronic" (issue 159), "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (issue 162), "Grass" (issue 168) and "Queen of Hearts" (issue 173).



Alexander Glass

On the ridge, where a break in the trees allows the light of the setting sun to play upon the forest, I stop for a moment to taste the air. It is cold and clean, and carries the sweet, dry taste of the late summer leaves. The bodies of the trees seem to glow, bronzed by the slowly ebbing light. A little way below me, the surface of the lake is as still and clear as glass. Smiling, breathing in the scent of the forest, I pause to take in the scene, committing it to memory. Then I half-step, half-slide down a bank torn by rotten roots and slippery with scree, through a tangle of scrub, and on towards the shore.

Here I stop, letting my pack fall to the ground. It hits with a dull thud and, gently, keels over. I laugh, knowing how it feels. Searching around a moment, I find a ledge of stone that juts out into the lake, and lie down on my stomach, resting my chin on my hands. Something darts by, over the water and into the trees, but I ignore it. I have set this time aside to put my thoughts in order. Nothing can be allowed to distract me; and I can't delay it any longer.

The water is still, so still that I can see my face gazing out of the water, as if I were looking into a mirror. My greying hair is tied loosely back, my brow stained with grime. No make-up: it wouldn't last long, out here. Behind my reflection, beneath the water's skin, I can see clear to the bottom of the lake, to the cold, wild landscape below, with its gentle hills and strange, swaying flora. This is a good place. Good enough.

I close my eyes, and think back.

I remember. Every detail, I remember. As clear as if I could see to the depths of my mind, I remember.

I can do this.

I am Lucid.

My first memory of Allan is from when we were at college together: tall and a little awkward, he used to have to duck his head every time he went through a doorway. It had become a reflex action – he'd lower his head as each door approached, without looking, without even thinking about it. Now and again, though, the reflex would fail: mostly this happened when he was distracted, sometimes by someone catching his eye, sometimes by something else. The first time I spoke to him was one of those times.

"Are you all right? Let me have a look."

He bowed to me, laughing at his own clumsiness. "It's fine. Really. A few more neurons gone forever, but I don't suppose I'll miss them."

"The skin isn't broken. But you ought to be more careful."

"I am more careful. I was distracted, that's all."

"Not by me, I hope."

"Just by a memory. My mind was wandering." He looked at me for a moment. "But you can do me a favour: don't hang around in any doorways, or I could hurt myself a lot worse than this... You're name's Carol, right?"

There should be more. There should be other memories, older memories than that, because I already knew

his name; I think we must have been half-introduced, on one of those nights when everyone met everyone else, and no one remembered more than three or four of the people whose hands they'd shaken. I suppose it isn't like that any more, now that pretty much every student goes through the Lucidity programme.

I wasn't Lucid then. It wasn't possible. The idea had been thrown around, but the technology wasn't there yet. So all of this is taken from my biomemory, or rather from the Lucid copy of it, with all the inaccuracies that entails. Maybe that's why those years, and the years that followed, seem so idyllic. Maybe it wasn't really that good. Maybe we had a lot more rows than I remember, and I've subconsciously edited them out. But I don't think so.

We got married the year we graduated, and we stayed married, which was becoming unusual, even back then. We didn't agree on everything, but we seemed to agree on everything important. We had no secrets from each other – at least, Allan joked, none that we knew about. Every human being is a puzzle, a mystery, to every other; we felt that we had come as close to solving the mysteries of each other as anyone could. After a few years we were holding down two jobs and bringing up two kids, but paying only one mortgage; after a few more years the mortgage was paid but the children were moving out. Time runs out so quickly. We didn't feel that we'd wasted it, though. We were happy, and we were lucky enough to realize it.

All of that is in my semantic memory. My episodic memory, even etched into the Lucid construct, is nothing like as neat: a collection of shards and fragments, in no logical order, bound to each other by coincidences of time and place, by common emotions, by other memories. I have a very vivid image of a day when Allan cleaned the windows, though there was nothing particularly special or different about that day apart from the golden August light that suddenly flooded through the house. I remember walking in the snow one winter, before Jonathan was born, talking about dreams of leaving: places we would go, if we had the money, and the time. I remember sitting in a cinema, holding hands in the dark, though I don't remember what we were watching. I remember hot chocolate in a big red cup. I remember cutting the grass. A party. A meal we made together. A song. I remember when we both realized that we were no longer young, and then later that we were getting old. We were content enough that we didn't give a lot of thought to the future. We never had. In all those years, nothing much had changed between us. We didn't think it ever would.

When Allan turned 65, something changed.

I don't know when it started, but I know when I first noticed it. It was a September evening, and Allan was sitting outside with his harmonica. He'd always wanted to be able to play it, and over the years he'd become pretty good at it, though he never thought he was good enough. He'd struggled to learn it: strange how something can look so easy and be so hard.

I was inside, on the phone to a friend, asking him and his wife to dinner. I was sitting on the stairs, leaning back against the wall, playing absently with the tele-

phone wire, winding it around my hand. I could hear Allan in the background, playing an old Muddy Waters riff, doing his best to improvise around it. Then he stopped.

In my memories of this memory, the silence takes on a sinister significance; in reality I noticed the silence, but didn't think anything of it. When I'd finished talking to Bill I went and found Allan, in the kitchen, making a sandwich. The harmonica was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's your harmonica?"

He looked at me, raising his brows, as if unsure of what he'd heard. I could see him going over the words in his head, trying to place them in context, trying to make some kind of sense out of what I'd said.

"My what?"

"Your harmonica." I glanced around, but didn't see it anywhere. Then I remembered I'd heard a click after he'd stopped playing: the sound of him putting the mouth-organ down on the ground. I went outside, and brought it back in to him.

"This." I waved it in front of his nose, a little exasperated. It had been a gift, not valuable, but treasured; he had always been so careful with it. Now he'd left it outside, down in the dirt.

"Oh." For a moment he looked at it as if he'd never seen it before. Then he nodded, took it from me, and slipped it into a pocket. "Did I leave it outside? Must be getting senile." He grinned. "I'm still hungry. I'm going to make an omelette. You want one?"

It seemed that he'd just forgotten about it. Anyone can forget something. I once left my purse on a train, and I'd left so many umbrellas in cafes and theatres and other places that I ended up always buying the cheapest ones I could, on the grounds that they wouldn't last long enough to wear out. So I managed to convince myself that the forgotten harmonica, the silence outside the window, meant nothing at all.

It was only later, the next day or the day after that, or maybe even a week after, that I noticed he wasn't playing the thing. He seemed to have lost interest. After years learning how to get a good sound out of it, he'd stopped in the middle of a song, and walked away. He never played another note as long as he lived.

There were other things. Allan's temper had grown worse. Up until then he'd been as gentle as a breeze, but now he started finding fault with me for the smallest things. Occasionally he blew up at me for no reason at all – or at least no reason that I could figure out.

After we'd both retired we agreed to move to the coast, and we had to sort through everything that had accumulated in the house, decide what to keep, and throw away the rest. Half-way through the task Allan became furious with me, telling me I was doing it all wrong, that I should leave it to him, he would sort it out by himself. The change was so sudden, and so violent, that I simply agreed to let him get on with it; I went downstairs and sat alone for a while with a cup of coffee, shaking a little, and worrying. Later on he came and joined me. His sudden flash of temper seemed to have burned itself out, and nothing more was said about it. When we went up

to bed, though, I saw that he hadn't done a thing since I'd gone downstairs. He must have been sitting there alone, in the midst of the chaotic remnants of all of our years in that house, doing nothing. For over an hour.

Another time he took me out to a restaurant where he'd booked us a table. When we got there, though, there was no table booked. He got into an argument with the staff. None of them remembered his phone call. Later, it turned out that he had made a booking, but then taken me to the wrong restaurant; the table he'd reserved had sat empty all evening in another place entirely, half way across town.

Still I didn't guess what was happening to him. I thought he must have been finding it difficult adjusting to his retirement. I wasn't finding it all that easy myself. I didn't even consider going to the doctor for a few months after that, not until Jonathan and his wife came to visit.

They stayed for three days and three nights, and during that time Allan seemed to be his old self again. I remember noticing that, so some part of me must have been watching him, worrying about him, all the time, even when I had convinced myself that the moods and the forgetfulness were just a phase he was going through. And for those three days, it looked as if I was right: there was no sign at all that anything was wrong. We talked, we played with Jonathan's children, we went down to the sea for a day, and all the while Allan was just as he had been before. I remember thinking of how he had been in college, years before; of how, even though his face had filled out and he was carrying some extra weight, even though he stooped a little now and didn't have to bend down to go through doorways, even though his skin and his bones were feeling the touch of time, inside his head he was still that awkward student. Awkward but charming; awkward but loving; awkward but irresistible.

The day after Jonathan and his family left, Allan forgot their visit. He went and sat out at the front of the house, and after a while I realized he was waiting for them to arrive. Those last three days had vanished from his memory, without even a ripple to show that they had been there. I tried to convince him; I went through everything that had happened, everything that we had said and done. Everything I could remember. It was no use. In the end he got angry, and I began to see how the forgetfulness and the anger were linked.

At last I forced myself to take him to a doctor. The doctor took my arm and gave me a one-word diagnosis: Alzheimer's.

That one word says everything and nothing.

I lie at the lake's edge with my head in my hands, first watching my reflection, then looking past it, through it: not to the alien land below, but into the Lucid construct. The lake and the forest recede to the periphery of my vision, and I am left alone with my thoughts, floating above a mental map of all my memories since I went through the programme, and a rough outline of those before, those stored in the copy of my biomemory. A glowing web of facts and associations, the nodes and arcs of

my life. Sensations glowing, tiny points of light. To one side, a custom-built archive, to store non-standard information. Everything that I know, and everything I have sensed and seen, is here.

There are many more memories copied from biomemory than there are new Lucid memories; and yet, since I became Lucid, I am storing more of what I have seen and learned. I call up the memory of the trees, recorded only a few moments before, up on the ridge, beneath the setting sun. Golden light running on their bodies. It is a good memory. Before that, there is a memory of walking in that same forest. The sun is higher in the sky, in that memory. From even earlier, there is a memory of lunch at the little place on the forest's edge.

They are pretty, but carry little weight. If they were stored in biomemory, I'd be tempted to erase them, or at least compress them and save them in the archives. That's what I'm here to do, after all: to sort through everything that has accumulated in my mind, decide what to keep, and throw away the rest. I could keep it all if I wanted; they tell me there's no practical limit to Lucid storage. But I may as well tidy up while I'm here.

I've put it off for long enough. I can't delay any longer. If I don't confirm the transfer of the memories I want, consolidate them in the construct, I'll lose them altogether as my biomemory deteriorates. The hard part is deciding what to erase. There are a few bad memories in there, memories I could do without. Memories I have often thought I would be better off not having.

Allan woke me up in the middle of the night. The moon was in the window, and there was snow on the ground; against the brightness of the moon on the snow, I woke to see Allan leaning over me, silhouetted before the window. I had been asleep for a few hours, and it took me a minute or two to surface; but Allan wanted to talk, and whatever it was it could not wait until morning. So I listened.

He was talking about someone called Carol. How he loved her, how he loved their children; and how he had begun to suspect her. She had taken a lover, he said. He couldn't prove it yet, but he knew. He told me about the terrible sense of betrayal; he told me of times when he knew she had been visiting her lover. On some of the times he mentioned, I had been away from him, for perfectly harmless reasons. On other times, I had been at home, and he had been with me.

I put a hand to his lips to silence him.

"Allan. It's me. It's Carol."

He stared at me. His eyes narrowed, as if the moonlight on the snow were too much to bear; his brow furrowed in a frown.

"It isn't true," I told him, and now my image of him was blurred by tears. "I've never done any of those things. I've always loved you."

He blinked, and nodded seriously. Then he turned away, without another word, and went back to sleep. I didn't know who he'd thought I was when he woke me, or why he thought his wife was being unfaithful. I didn't know whether he'd believed me when I had told him who

I was, or when I tried to tell him I loved him. I brought up the subject, as delicately as I could, the next morning, after spending most of the night lying awake. He insisted that he remembered nothing of it.

I remember all of this, but I don't remember much of what I thought at the time. I must have told myself a thousand little lies, to convince myself that Allan was all right, that there was nothing really wrong with him, that the doctor was mistaken, that he would recover; then, later, that the disease would not progress, that Allan would retain his memory, retain something of himself, that he might even recover memories he had thought were lost; and then, finally, that I had the strength to look after him at home, that I didn't need any help with him. Every day I must have told myself one more lie, but I hardly remember them at all.

Allan no longer understood his own condition. He had seemed to accept it at first. Then he insisted that the diagnosis was wrong. Then, finally, he seemed to forget about it altogether, and as far as I could see he didn't even really grasp what Alzheimer's was. Of course, it was hard to know for sure.

The hardest thing was the way he often seemed to be fine, functioning normally, his mind and memory intact. Those closest to him could see the change in him, but to casual acquaintances he was still the same person. He could make small talk, and he could tell a joke or a story, and it would bring me to tears, because I no longer knew whether or not he understood what he was saying. When he spoke of things we had done, or things that had happened to us, I never knew whether they meant anything to him, or whether he recounted them almost as an automatic response, a conversational subroutine that cast around for memories that would fit the conversation, and put them into words.

The next time he woke me in the night, I thought I was ready for whatever he might say. He didn't say anything. He stared at me a moment, then backed away, climbing from the bed and running down the stairs. Following him, I heard his voice echoing in the stairway as he spoke to someone on the telephone. I followed him down, listening, unable to catch what was being said.

When I reached him he was replacing the phone in its cradle.

"Allan?"

"Carol. Where have you been?" He put his arms around me. "Thank God you're safe. Someone was in the house."

"Someone? Who?"

"I don't know. A woman. She was in the bedroom. You weren't there. I didn't know what to do."

I pushed him away, held him at arm's length. "What did you do?"

"I called the police."

In the distance, I could already hear the howl of the sirens.

From then on, things were different. It was as if the diagnosis had accelerated the process. The times he didn't recognize me became more frequent, and each time it seemed to take longer for him to be himself again. He would never admit that he had failed to recognize me. I

don't think he knew. He really thought I was someone else, sometimes a stranger, sometimes someone he knew.

In the end I gave in, stopped trying to take care of him. The doctors had been encouraging me to put him into a nursing home, but for a long time I was too stubborn even to consider it. Eventually, though, I had to go along with it. I couldn't deal with Allan on my own any more. Once I had admitted that to myself, I could finally admit it to the doctors, and they arranged a place in a home.

That was when the Lucidity programme was just starting. I didn't know anything about it at the time; I thought it was still just a neuroscientist's dream. But after Allan had been taken to the home, the doctor told me it had become real.

Even when he told me, I didn't understand it right away. "What does it mean?"

"That depends, Carol. You can have retrograde Lucidity, or anterograde Lucidity, or you can have both."

"I see," I said, shortly, impatient with the jargon he was throwing at me. There was no time for it. "And what does that mean?"

"Basically it means you can back up part of your memory. You can back up your existing memory, or parts of it. That's a two-stage process: you make an initial copy, and then consolidate it later. Or, you can leave your existing memory as it is, and divert any new memories directly to the Lucid construct. Or you can have all your memories, old and new, backed up. It's up to you."

"And you're offering me this for Allan?"

He pursed his lips, and I knew what his answer would be.

"No. It might have helped him if the Lucidity programme had been available a few years ago. But I think Allan's symptoms have progressed so far that the programme can no longer do much to help him. He no longer knows which are memories and which are fantasies. Even if he did, the events have become disassociated from the people involved, so that he isn't sure who anyone is. I doubt that anyone could reconstruct the memories properly. It would be a huge task."

"But it can be done?"

He tipped his head to one side, lifting his shoulders. My questions were making him uncomfortable. "Maybe." Then he shook his head. "No, I don't think so. The construct only records what is there. The exact interpretation of the data depends on the individual. I doubt that one person could interpret anyone else's memories. There's enough variation in the architecture of the brain to make it practically impossible. Another person's mind may be a good place to visit, but you can never make yourself a part of it. It's alien territory."

"Then why are we talking about Lucidity at all?"

"For you," he said, simply. Then: "I know all your thoughts are with Allan. But you can't help him. No one can. The truth is – and I hope you'll forgive me for being so blunt – the best we can do is keep him comfortable."

"Until he dies."

"Yes. Until he dies."

I stared down at my hands. They were still strong, strong enough, but the skin was loosening, and bore a

scattering of marks and smudges. I was in good shape, but, like Allan, I had felt the touch of time.

"How much?" I asked, quietly.

He told me. I nodded, and said I would think about it.

Then I went to see Allan. I didn't want to make a decision like that without consulting him.

He had worsened again since coming to the home. He no longer knew me. At first he had been pleased to see me, even so: he associated me with something good, though he never remembered who I was. I told myself that would have to be enough. It was something, at least. It was what nearly five decades of marriage had been reduced to: a vague feeling that he liked me better than the next person. It wasn't his fault. I kept telling myself that. But sometimes I hated him for it. And then I hated myself for hating him.

In the last few weeks he had had difficulty expressing himself. The connections between words and their meanings were disintegrating, as the connections between his memories had been broken before. It happened quickly, too quickly to take in; every time I saw him, he had receded further from me; another part of him was gone.

I still came to see him whenever I could. I knew there would be a point when it no longer mattered to him whether I came or not. Maybe we'd already reached that point. It still mattered to me, though.

He was in a chair by the window, looking out over the gardens. His hands rested in his lap, to one side, both on his right thigh, as if he had no more use for them and had set them aside. He looked up at me as I approached, then looked away again.

I sat beside him for a while, not speaking. I didn't want to spoil it. If I spoke, we would have to determine who I was, and I couldn't face it just then. I wanted to pretend that he knew me, that we were sitting together at home, at ease with each other, before all of this had started: before that night with the harmonica, and the sudden silence outside the window.

At last he turned to me, and said: "They've missed lunch. They've missed it again."

I shook my head. "We had lunch. Remember? I was here. Just before I went to see the doctor."

None of this seemed to register. "They've missed lunch," he said again, and pointed to the window. I peered out into the garden, and saw a shape on the grass: someone's hat. That was what he meant. He had no idea that the words were coming out all wrong.

"Someone lost their hat," I said, and he nodded sadly.

His hand returned to its place in his lap. Lying there, it shuddered a little. He looked down at it, and laughed, soundlessly. He glanced up at me, indicating his hand, inviting me to share in the joke. The hand was no longer shaking, but he kept on laughing for a while longer.

After a time he grew quiet. Outside, it had started to rain. Somewhere nearby, one of the other patients was crying softly. Allan screwed up his face, imitating her, but quickly lost interest.

Then he looked at me.

"Carol," he said, and the sound of my name sent a jolt through my body. "Carol, I love you." He was smiling, a

small, sad smile but a real one, and I saw something in his eyes that had been missing for a while. "I'm sorry about the things I've said. I didn't mean them. I'm sorry about all this. About everything." He paused for a moment, took a breath. He looked over at the clock, then back at me, as if measuring out the time he had to say what he had to say. "I love you," he repeated.

Then he was gone, staring out of the window once more.

I didn't have the chance to tell him I loved him too. I'd missed the moment, the window of lucidity. I told him anyway, but I don't know whether he understood. A curtain had come down again in his mind.

In the end, I find that my decision is already made. I must keep all those memories, even those that are hardest to bear. Now that I know it, it seems an easy decision; strange how something can look so easy and be so hard.

In my mind, I reach into the Lucidity construct, and consolidate the copy of my biomemory. All of it. Even those memories I am no longer sure about, the ones which might have been dreams or imaginings; even those which are memories of memories, those which have been eroded by time into the shapes I wish to give them. A new network forms, and I lie by the water and watch as it is etched into the construct, piece by piece, moment by moment.

Then it is done. My biomemory can be left to itself, a copy of myself growing gradually more corrupted as I get older. Let it die. I no longer need it.

I am Lucid.

A wind leaps from the surface of the lake, stirring the mirror: my face, gazing out of the water, vanishes in an instant as ripples dance across the skin of the lake. In the fading light I can still make out a glimpse of that wild landscape below. It seems a good place, though I will never really know it.

Leaving the ledge of stone behind, I pick up my pack and scramble through the scrub, up the broken bank, and on into the trees. On the ridge above, I stop again to taste the air. The last ragged rays of the sun have etched lines of ink-red light upon the trees. I am leaving the lake behind, but I carry the memory of it with me.

I carry Allan with me, too. His body has given in at last, but I carry his memory – his memories – in the Lucid construct, in a custom-made, non-standard archive. The memories may be confused, their structure corrupted, but they are his. They are everything that he knows, and everything he has sensed and seen. There is a core of him within them, a part of him that is still lucid. I am sure that I can find it. If anyone can solve the puzzle, the mystery, of his memories, I can.

I begin the long walk home, keeping the setting sun at my back.

Alexander Glass lives in London, and is still in his 20s. His previous stories for *Interzone* include "Carla's Eye" (issue 130), "The Mirror Repair'd" (issue 139), "Grandma's Bubble and the Speaking Clock" (issue 143), "The Watcher's Curse" (issue 162) and "The Eaters" (issue 164).

Ringo Night at a Martian Sportsbar

Thomas M. Disch

"Big bang, my ass!" grumbled the omnipotent goddess Rwnng over her third tall schooner of May wine. "I created this entire damn universe and don't you ever forget it."

"Never," Xglotl assured her, "ever." Xglotl, already well lubricated, was running an old-fashioned spreadsheet with half its mind and playing four bingo cards with the other. "This is a lovely universe, I've always thought so, and it's obvious that it had to be created by a god no less lovely. Or goddess. It only stands to reason."

Rwnng glowered at the servile mechanism suspiciously. She knew she was being flattered, but was it from piety or same baser motive? With Xglotl she never could tell. "Something like this doesn't just happen," she insisted.

"Of course not," said Xglotl, stroking her Medusa hair with one of its extensors. The hair gradually relaxed. "That's quite unthinkable. Any theologian would agree."

The robart slid down the bar towards them. "There's more where that came from," he told Rwnng, squirting the May wine unbidden into her willing maw, then refilling the schooner. "How about those Mets then?"

"Oh yes," Rwnng concurred with an absent-minded trembling of her chins. "They are something all right. Three in one!"

"Hey!" said the robart. It slid away, job done.

"What in the world was that supposed to mean: three in one?"

"Almost anything you want it to, my little tin can. It could be a vitamin supplement. Or the Holy Trinity, if you're into theology, which I'm not. Or sportstalk."

"Oh, I hate sportstalk. It's so pointless."

"And spreadsheets?" the goddess asked. "They have a point?"

"If you want your books to balance at tax time, they certainly do. Anyhow, spreadsheets are fun. Oh, look at that: N-36! If it had been N-35, I'd have had a bingo."

"Don't change the subject," Rwnng ordained. "Sportstalk is essential to the entire social fabric. It's all that allows lower-class men and upper-class men to live on the same planet. They can ignore their economic and erotic differences and spend two or three minutes ritually bonding."

"Oh, spare me." Xglotl strobed derisively. "It's all just vector quantities at the lowest level of stimulus and response. How could any modern machine possibly take an interest in inserting sphere A in hole A? In slow motion!"

"You enjoy counterpoint," Rwnng noted. "And ancient plastics. And sonnets."

"I collect ancient plastics. And for their ingenuous charm, not their chemical complexity. I would never collect modern plastics."

Another robart whizzed along the bar dispensing free samples of Falstaff, the new virtual hallucinogen from the Verizon-Disney distillery. "Try this why don't you," it said with each whoosh of its atomizer. Then, like an animate box of Wheaties, the robart added a sports datum. "Did you know that Conan Brinks of the Chicago Felons was genetically a mouse? That's right, he looked like a man and pitched like a man but all his DNA was actually derived from an ordinary laboratory mouse! Think about that!"

"I didn't know that, did you?" said Xglotl.

"I know everything," said Rwnng. "That's what it means to be omniscient."

"O-66," announced the bingo caller on the screen above the bar. One of Xglotl's cards lit up to indicate a hit, but it was a solitaire with no other score in the same row or column.

"I used to have a whole congregation of worshippers like that," Rwnng said in a nostalgic tone. "They were cloned from mouse DNA. Right here on Mars. That kind of bio-engineering wasn't legal on Earth back then. Droll little creatures. All dwarves, all male, and fanatical as Anabaptists. Regrettably, they tended to die in their teens. I told them they'd all go to Valhalla." She puckered with amusement, then sighed. "I wonder what ever became of them."

"I thought you were omniscient, Rwnng, my adorable one."

"You doubt it? I'll tell you the number of the next ping-pong ball that Episcopal haploid is going to pick from the hopper. It will be B-5."

The caller reached into the hopper, caught a ball and held it up to the camera. "B-5," she announced.

Someone at one of the tables beyond the aquarium room divider called out "Bingo!" and there was a short, celebratory twinkling of the bingo's system's lights. Then the winning bingo card's winning column was showcased on all the screens in the bar.

"Damn it," said Xglotl, "I really thought I was going to win that time."

Rwnng didn't say a word. She knew that Xglotl would never win a game of bingo, not if he played eight cards at a time till the bar went bankrupt in the year 3011, Common Era. Such was her everlasting and unalterable decree, but she would never have revealed that to Xglotl. She was a cruel goddess, but she wasn't stupid. If you want to be worshipped you have to extend some kind of hope.

Thomas M. Disch, who lives in New York State, is a longtime contributor to *Interzone*. His previous short-short story about the goddess Rwnng, "Martian Madness," appeared in issue 170.

THE VIOLINIST

Zoran Zivkovic

The professor knew he was not going to live through the night.

Dr Dean did not tell him that, of course. At least not to his face. But his demeanour confirmed the inevitability.

As usual, the doctor dropped by to see him at 23:10, after his shift was over. Before he entered the room, he spent a few minutes in the glass cubicle outside, talking quietly with the duty nurse, Mrs Roszel. They talked in low voices, periodically looking through the glass at the sick man's bed. At one point Mrs Roszel shook her bowed head and raised clenched fingers to her eyes, as if to wipe away tears.

When he appeared before the professor, Dr Dean tried his best to appear relaxed and cheerful, but he was not a very good actor. He must have had to undertake the role of the false optimist many times in his long career, but the small things still gave him away. He avoided looking the professor in the eye, finding various excuses to turn his glance aside. He checked his pulse, though they both knew it served no purpose. Then he tightened and smoothed the bedclothes with brusque, nervous movements, which was also unnecessary and in any case Mrs Roszel's job, which she performed frequently and expertly.

Then he went to stand by the large window and stare out at Princeton's spring night. Gusts of rain beat against the pane, making ephemeral streaks that distorted the doctor's dimly reflected face. He sighed, and told his patient that he actually envied him. What he wouldn't give to be in his place! The professor was already in bed, but before the doctor lay a good half-hour's drive through this foul weather, to be followed by at least another hour filled with various obligations, all to be discharged before he could finally go to bed himself. But such was life. Some people were lucky and some were not.

He hesitated after saying this, because the conclusion was somehow inappropriate, given the circumstances. His intention had been to cheer the professor up and instil some hope, however unfounded, but it seemed he had inadvertently gone too far. It might have appeared cynical or even cruel to claim that someone whose hours were literally numbered was lucky. He turned from the window, and for the first time looked at his patient's haggard face.

The expression on it made the doctor feel foolish, for it told him that his acting had been as unsuitable as it was inept. He had seen that expression before, albeit rarely. The professor was not only conscious of what awaited him, but prepared for it. He did not expect any consolation, nor did he need it. This was no place for empty words.

The doctor went up to the bed and shook the old man's cold, slender hand. "Good night, Professor." It took considerable effort to keep his voice from trembling.

"Good-bye, Doctor."

Dr Dean gently patted the back of his patient's hand with his free hand. He tried to smile, but only managed a grimace. Then he turned and, more hastily than he liked or had intended, left the patient's room. As he put on his raincoat and hat in the cubicle, he exchanged a few more words with Mrs Roszel.

Ten minutes later the nurse went into the patient's room to prepare him for the night. She began by giving him an oval blue pill. The Professor was given one every night before sleeping, and he would try to swallow it quickly with a little water because it tasted bitter. He took it as dutifully as ever, although he felt it was a pointless exercise. Not to have done so might have been awkward for Mrs Roszel, and she took care of him not only conscientiously but with affection.

As she needlessly straightened his bedclothes, she murmured something about the rain that had been pouring ceaselessly since early afternoon. Then she went to the window and closed the curtains. The drumming of the heavy drops suddenly became muffled and distant. She went back to the bed and spent a few moments silently arranging the yellow wildflowers on his night table. It seemed as if she wanted to say something else, but was hesitating for some reason. When she finally left the room, still without saying anything, the professor felt relieved. He did not feel like talking to Mrs Roszel right then.

The nurse stopped at the entrance to her cubicle and turned off the strip light. "I'll be here if you need anything, Professor," she said softly. "Just call for me. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs Roszel."

He looked at her through the glass, sitting at her small desk. Now the only source of light in both rooms was a lamp with a thick yellow shade. Its dull glow made the white ribbon which kept the nurse's hair off her forehead look like a golden aureole. She had lowered her head to read a book, without taking her usual final glance at her patient.

The pill soon began to take effect. He first felt the dull, unremitting pain in his stomach soften to barely noticeable discomfort, as if a large pillow had been placed over his abdomen. Then the familiar feeling of floating began. Suddenly the bed seemed to disappear and he was lying in empty space, completely weightless. He knew it was only an illusion, but that did nothing to lessen the intoxicating pleasure of the feeling. Not even tonight.

The floating would not last long. Before he fell asleep he would experience a brief feeling that his body had separated into an assembly of weakly connected spheres. Soundlessly, the fragile links between them would start to dissolve, and he would melt into nothingness, merging with the black infinity that surrounded him. His last conscious thought would be that this must be what dying was like. Courtesy of the blue pill, he had died every night since his arrival at the hospital.

In the morning he would wake in a bad mood. It bothered him that he was not afraid of dying. Death seemed somehow attractive; it was almost as if he wanted to die, and he felt that he should not feel like that. If for no other reason, he hoped he would not die before finding the answers to several questions that had plagued him throughout his adult life. It would be quite unjust if he were denied them – but perhaps the world was only orderly, and not just. Certainly, there was very little time left for justice to be done.

This time, however, he did not break up into spheres. He was prevented by the sudden intrusion of music. It was barely audible but certainly present, though he could not determine the source; it seemed to come from all around him. Mrs Roszel kept a small radio on her desk, but she would never play it this late. He looked in the nurse's direction. She was still engrossed in her book, apparently not hearing a thing.

A violin was weaving a slow, almost dreamy melody. He did not recognize it at once though he had played the violin since childhood, but something stirred in the depths of his memory, striving to reach the surface. For a despairing moment he thought it would fail; that the memory, like so many others, would stay bound forever below the thick webbing that enveloped his aged mind. Then the sound, as if wanting to help, became a tiny bit louder – and a bolt of lightning flashed through the gap of 60 years, taking him back to that long-ago summer day in northern Italy.

The small town in which he found himself as he walked the back roads from Milan to Genoa seemed to be completely deserted, even here on the main square, but this did not surprise him. All small places give such an impression during the siesta time from two to four in the afternoon, when the inhabitants retreat from the unbearable heat into the shuttered cool of their homes.

This did not bother him very much. The fewer local peo-

ple he ran into, the fewer difficulties he would have. He was a shy 15-year-old, and he found the language difficult. Almost no one understood his native German, and he had only a very limited command of the melodious speech of this area, with its open, resonant vowels. So he took pains to enter into conversation with people only when necessary, shrinking from their presumed distaste for his accent that must sound to them like the screech of rusty gears.

The *piazza* was approximately square in shape, with a small fountain in the middle. The young man put his canvas rucksack on the ground and started to fill his cupped hands with water from the arching stream. He splashed his face with water, letting it drip, and then looked around, head raised, squinting at the white stone facades. His eyes, used to the monotonous greyness of northern lands, constantly ached from the bright colours of Italy. Everything around him was vibrating, twinkling, glimmering, bursting. He had the feeling of being trapped in a crystal that absorbed light from all sides, but did not let it out again.

The silence was suddenly broken by the sound of a violin. It came from the top of a wide, three-storey building that was separated from the church belfry by an extremely narrow, shaded street. The window in the garret was open, probably the only one unshuttered on the whole square, and in the room behind it someone had chosen to fill this stagnant, bright, deserted hour with music. It was not a student practising, but an experienced violinist, a master whose fingers had total command of the instrument.

The chance listener next to the fountain stared, enchanted, at the high window. Even had he not been a skilled violinist himself, he could never have remained unaffected. Cascades of pure harmony streamed from above, as if from heaven. They penetrated deep inside him, to the very centre of his being, where they created resonant reflections. To devote his utmost concentration to listening, he closed his eyes.

He was trying to expel the omnipresent light to take best advantage of the sound, but without success. The light did not disappear under his lowered eyelids. Not only was it still there, it suppressed everything else with the power of its unabated radiance. And then, in a moment of revelation, he understood. The light was still there because the music was all about it. Could there be anything more fitting? What was invoked could not have been presented to him so comprehensively by any other means. He was inside the light, and its secrets started to peel away before him, finally displaying the wondrous simplicity of its essence.

He stayed there so long, motionless, listening to the light, that he lost track of time. Something very strange had happened to time. Its course seemed to decelerate, gradually at first, then exponentially, until it finally stopped, frozen in a timeless ray that rushed through strangely distorted space. Under the tremendous pressure of light, space started to undulate, turn and twist, until it was transformed into a vortex that carried him, powerfully and irresistibly, towards the black point deep within its centre. The point became a circle, then a wide opening in the fabric of reality, until it became an immense

pit of deepest night, sucking him in like a speck of dust.

When he came to his senses he was at first unsure where he was. For a moment he thought he was still in the heart of darkness, but then he realized it was not total, for it was pierced by sunbeams that slanted like sparkling spears through narrow windows in a thick stone wall. The rays were multicoloured because they came through stained glass. The music had ceased.

The young man realized he was lying on something cold and hard. He tried to get up, but a pair of hands appeared and gently but firmly pushed him back. A figure in a brown mantle bent down over him; it was a priest, with greying hair and beard, wearing small, round, wire-rimmed glasses. He smiled at the young man and then began to speak. The young man could make out only a few words in the deluge of Italian: sun, fall, brought into the church.

He started to get up again, hastily explaining to the priest that he had to return to the square as soon as possible so as to hear the end of the music of light – it meant so much to him. Otherwise he was fine, there was no need to worry: he had experienced enlightenment, not sunstroke. The priest's only reply was an uncomprehending shrug, but this time there was no need for the priest's hands to stop him from getting up. He had not even reached a sitting position when his head started to swim. Overcome by exhaustion, he lay back down on the marble platform by the wall of the church, where they had laid him when they brought him in.

The priest reached for the wet cloth on the weary traveller's forehead and started to wipe it over his cheeks and neck. He was still talking, but the young man could make even less sense of it than before. He stopped listening, as despair filled his soul. If only he had stayed there a little longer! If only that vortex hadn't whisked him away so soon, he could have grasped the essence of light. As it was, he could only remember broken fragments, loose threads from the tapestry, pebbles detached from the mosaic. But at least he knew the mosaic existed and that it was flawless in its irreducible, self-evident necessity. Yet it seemed he had no right to hope ever to see it again, though he knew that he would devote the rest of his life to a tireless search for it.

It was sunset when he left the church. He still felt a bit light-headed, but he had to be on his way. The *piazza* was now full of people, and the shutters on the windows stood wide. All but one. He spent some time before the entrance to the three-storey building, whose highest window was now only a blind, mute eye, but in the end he did not seek out the musician in the garret. It was not his poor knowledge of Italian that prevented him, for he would have done the same thing if he could have used German. What could he say to the Violinist, in any language? Moreover, he suspected that He was no longer there at all.

There was no radiance this time. Here in the gloom of the hospital room, he no longer had to close his eyes to listen to the message of the music. The thrill he had experienced once, so long ago, was not here, nor would it have suited this period of his life or his present circumstances.

All that he felt, aside from the intoxicating effect of the blue pill, was a moment of happiness coursing gently through him, stemming from the knowledge that there was justice in the world, after all.

The great mosaic appeared before him, woven from vibrating threads of air. It was almost completely filled in. He knew perfectly well which pebbles were missing. He had not been allowed to find them himself, as he had the others, but that no longer mattered; he had long ago discarded vanity. All that mattered was to see them at last, during the short time remaining to him.

The violin began to build shapes out of sound that slotted perfectly into the empty spaces. Each part represented a distinct revelation: amazingly simple, magnificently complex, wondrously unbelievable, insanely unacceptable. Now he understood why he would never have been able to find some of the answers. He simply did not have the right questions.

When the grand architecture of tones was finally complete, he had to confront its most disturbing characteristic: the whole and its parts were not in harmony. When he focused on the whole, the parts became fuzzy – and vice versa. He could not concentrate his internal eye on both at the same time. Once everything inside him would have rebelled at this imperfection, but not any longer: it was his preconceptions that had been wrong, of course. The world did not have to be orderly, at least not in the way he had imagined it. The Violinist based his composition on completely different principles.

He did not realize at first that the music had stopped. It was only when the mosaic came apart, giving way to the dark space it had temporarily occupied, that he became aware of the silence. He lay there confused for several moments, staring in front of him. Something must surely follow, this seemed inevitable. Death, perhaps? Was there any moment more suitable to die? But nothing happened. The spheres were still tightly grouped together.

At the thought of death he was overcome with fear. That had never happened before, but now something had undermined his previous readiness to die. For a while he could not identify it, but then it dawned on him: if he were to die right then, he would take the knowledge he had just gained to the grave with him. It would be as if nothing had happened, as if he had not finally comprehended. He had longed for it primarily to satisfy his own curiosity, but now that seemed selfish. No, he had to leave a trace of what he had learned, at whatever cost.

But how? What could he do, lying here on his deathbed? And how much time did he have left? Certainly not much. He felt a cold wave of panic creep down the back of his neck. He started to look feverishly about the dark room, perceiving the outlines of familiar objects. Nothing he saw seemed of any help, until the lighted figure of the nurse in her cubicle came into his field of vision. His heart started to beat faster. That was it! There was no other choice. She was his last hope.

"Mrs Roszel," he called, his voice raised and impatient.

The nurse lifted her eyes from her book, then got up and hurried to her patient.

As he watched her approach, it crossed his mind that

he didn't actually know how to tell her what he had to say. The best thing would be if he had a violin. Then he could play it all to her, transmitting what he had just heard with utmost fidelity. There would be nothing of the vagueness, ambiguity or imperfection that went with words. Everything would be crystal clear, even the most difficult aspects. But there was no violin, unfortunately. He had to rely on language.

He did not hesitate for a moment about the language to use. The gears might sound rusty, but they fitted together most precisely, leaving the least room for idle motion, friction, resistance. He thought with a smile how strange it was that this language, which was the closest to music in terms of expressiveness, was farthest away in terms of sonority. In addition, it was the language he felt closest to. He would never have been able to express something as complex in a foreign language. Even in his mother tongue he would have considerable trouble.

There was no time to waste on an introduction so he went straight to the point as soon as Mrs Roszel reached the head of the bed. He spoke quickly, concisely when that was possible, more extensively when that could not be avoided. He was full of sympathy for the expression of bewilderment and disbelief on her face, and for her periodic helpless shrug of the shoulders. What he was revealing to her was the very foundation which upheld the universe. Fortunately, she did not need to try to understand what he was saying. It would

be enough to remember his words, clear and coherent, so as to transmit them faithfully to those who would be able to understand them. That, at least, was not difficult.

He was describing the last part of the puzzle when he felt the links between the spheres finally loosen. He was not afraid that time would run out before he finished. There was justice in the world, was there not? The ways of the Violinist might be subtle, but He was certainly not malicious. What would be the sense in stopping him now, at the very end, after everything He had offered him? None, of course. The professor continued to speak softly to Mrs Roszel, who was still listening carefully. The darkness waited patiently for him to reach the end before it engulfed him. He fell into it cheerfully, with a feeling of accomplishment. He had given the world his greatest legacy. Had he dared hope for anything greater?

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

Translation edited by Christopher Gilmore

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Zoran Zivkovic lives in Belgrade, and is *Interzone's* most frequently-published foreign-language contributor. The above piece is the sixth in a cycle of subtly-connected fantasies called *Seven Touches of Music*. (The stories may be read in any order.) We shall run an interview with Zoran in the next issue, together with the seventh and last story of the cycle.

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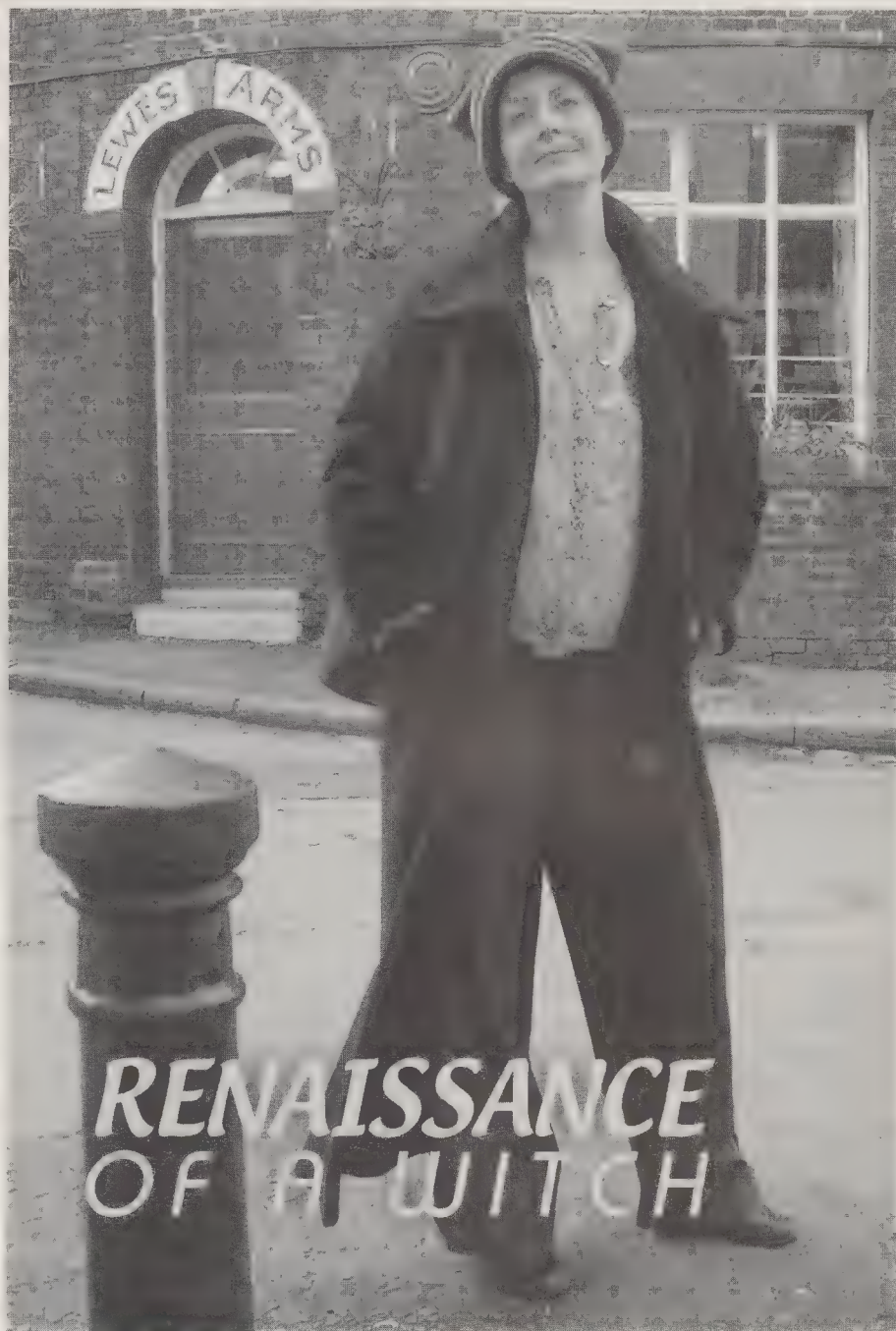
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Jan Siegel

interviewed by
Paul Brazier

Jan Siegel has a classic author's c.v. – barmaid, garage hand, bilingual secretary, lab assistant, actress, model, journalist, performance poet, and unemployed philosopher. She has also written several novels under other names, so comes to fantasy with considerable experience. Her first novel as Jan Siegel was Prospero's Children, an intriguing tale of cold-hearted mermaids and warm-hearted people, set in modern England and ancient Atlantis. It was published in 1999 to critical acclaim, and the publisher says sales are good as well. The second, The Dragoncharmer, appeared just a year later, and picks up the story of the heroine, Fern Capel, twelve years later. A third novel, Witch's Honour is due in summer 2002, and the whole series is likely to consist of six or seven books.



Jan Siegel was born in London, but her family moved to Lewes, the county town of East Sussex, when she was a year old, and she has been based there ever since – indeed, this interview was conducted in her flat overlooking the war memorial there. She went to Brighton and Hove High School, passed “the usual crop of exams,” then “junked university for the Real World. I walked out in first term. I was studying languages. I was bored. “The school thought I should do languages. In those days, career advice wasn’t very good. What I actually wanted to study was philosophy, but I didn’t think I could because they didn’t teach it at school. It was only when it was far too late I discovered I could have done what I wanted. I could have gone to Cambridge under those cir-

cumstances, which is also what I wanted. But I’m really glad I left, because I went and worked in a hospital as a nurse – I didn’t train, but I learned a great deal.”

But she has always been a storyteller. “From a very early age, in the car on the way to school, we would take turns to tell each other stories. I had a desperately happy childhood. Adulthood has been difficult, but I used to complain about my childhood a great deal to my parents – ‘How can I be a great creative genius when I’ve had this amazingly happy normal childhood?’ I said. I’d always wanted to be a writer, I’d written stories as long as I’d written – my mother had stuff that I wrote when I was five...

“I spent a large amount of the 1990s nursing my mother who was dying of

cancer, and sorting out the family finances. Ultimately, in a fit of madness, I produced *Prospero's Children* on spec in the hope of making my fortune."

Siegel claims not to have read much fantasy, apart from the classics – Tolkien, Mervyn Peake, Alan Garner, C.S. Lewis, Ursula Le Guin –

"Tolkien was the first major influence. I read *The Lord of the Rings* when I was eleven, in hardback. I got the hardbacks out of the library – in the wrong order, because somebody else had them. I read the first, the third and the second – I just couldn't wait to get them in the right order. It's not an ideal way to read it, but it didn't bother me, and it totally changed the way I thought about writing."

Her books do have a flavour of *Gormenghast* as well.

"Mervyn Peake is the greatest. I couldn't begin to write like him; nor would I want to, because it's not easily digestible. I want to be digestible, I want to be a page-turner – and only people like me find Mervyn Peake a page-turner. He is a difficult writer; one of the most amazing writers in the English language. He paints with language. To me, when you get a Mervyn Peake description, it's like looking at a Rembrandt – amazing detail and fantastic lighting effects. I learned a lot from reading him, because I try to bring in lighting and sound effects too."

"There are so many dimensions to writing, and many writers nowadays, particularly in the popular market, are lazy about it. It's different if you're consciously minimalist, but a lot of it is just laziness. They don't realize just how much you can get in. At the same time, you've got to keep it readable, you've got to keep it a page-turner. And I don't think 'page-turner' is a dirty word. In fact, I think 'popular' is the new 'literary'. 'Popular' is anything people enjoy reading, as opposed to things they read because they want to discuss them at Islington dinner parties – or don't read, but buy so that they can look as if they've read."

"I don't think that reading a book should be a chore. I think it should be fun. And I think with too much modern literature there is an element of this – while writing a book is inspiration and drudgery, reading it should not involve the drudgery."

"One of my contemporaries when we were starting out was Kazuo Ishiguro, who won the Booker. Ish did all the things he was supposed to and went on and wrote 'literature.' Whereas I refused to do anything I was supposed to and said I want to write 'good' popular fiction. That was what I always wanted. I always felt that being a storyteller and being entertaining was really important."

Siegel's books certainly do not suffer

from comparison to such literary high achievers, so it only seems fair to think of her books as literary fantasy.

"Yes, I write literary fantasy, but the literary establishment frowns on both science fiction and fantasy, and fantasy more than sf."

Nevertheless, literature has had a strong influence on her.

"My first published book, *Pzyche*, used the story from *The Tempest*. I didn't do it deliberately, I just noticed afterwards. And my thriller, *Tantalus*, that's Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*."

Of course, this is theatre rather than literature.

"I like theatre, I've done a bit of acting, it's something I would have liked to have studied if I hadn't been so determined to change the script all the time. I love acting. I do performance poetry and I think, I'm up here, I've got this power, I've got the audience down there, this is major power. It's such a high. And I'm darkly suspicious of it because it's such a kick, I'm always looking for the catch. Having said that, I could never have handled the stage as a career because to get up there, night after night, and try to come to the same words fresh, I'd be bored rigid. I'd want to do it once and then leave it. So I could have done film and TV maybe, except that's not such a high because you haven't got a live audience. I haven't got the right discipline to be a proper actress. I'm a natural role-player really. Exhibitionist, whatever. It's huge fun."

"But writing was always important. I draw reasonably well, and I like drawing, but it never mattered to me in the same way – writing matters. I didn't really want to be a writer, it just happened."

Although she already had a track

record as an author, Siegel says she wrote *Prospero's Children* "on spec, and got the contract after. I handed it to my agent, Anthony Harwood, in pieces because initially we thought we might get a contract on a few chapters, but we decided if I could get the financing – I was just able to survive financially – I would write the whole book, and then negotiate. But several publishers turned it down, because it wasn't American, it wasn't the usual pseudo-mediaeval saga that was very much in vogue at that time. This is pre-Harry Potter, remember. I think the first Harry Potter was out, but the Harry Potter wave hadn't hit. People like Philip Pullman were just being talked about."

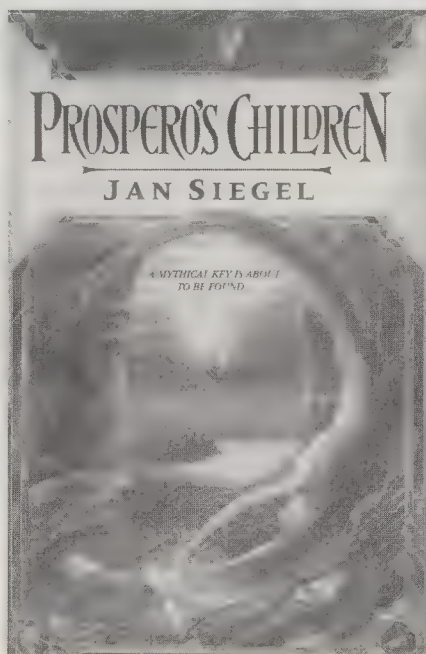
There appears to be a great influence of Terry Pratchett in Siegel's books; not in the sense that there is a stream of jokes and one-liners, but rather in that while the situations are very serious, they are also sometimes intrinsically funny and that this chiaroscuro of the horror and the humour is very prevalent in the work of both writers.

"I love Terry Pratchett. He's about the only writer I buy before he comes out. I order them, pre-publication. There isn't any other writer that does that for me. I actually had a huge crisis in the middle of writing *Prospero's Children*, because I had only just discovered Terry Pratchett, and I rang my agent and said, 'I think I ought to be doing humour.' Anyway, he talked soothingly to me for a while – I'd written half the book at that point – and said, 'Do not rip this up, it is going well.' And someone said to me at a party recently, 'I think your books are so funny,' and there is a lot of humour of an understated kind – more in the second book than in the first one. And there's even more humour in the third book."

Few writers' work survives as long as Middleton & Rowley's, never mind with the cachet of a Shakespeare, so, at the beginning of her career, it is even more difficult to predict Jan Siegel's durability – an awful lot of people write books, and they're out, and gone in six months.

"This is the problem. The stuff that is widely read now won't be read in centuries' time. I can't really believe that in 400 years' time people will be reading, say, John Grisham. whereas they might still be reading Terry Pratchett – although it's very rare for comedy novels to survive, because comedy dates so quickly. Which is the strange thing about something like *Cold Comfort Farm*, which has survived the original it was parodying – it's one of the few that works. Like the Sellars and Yateman, *1066 and All That*.

"And I think this is why the best of



Terry Pratchett will survive, because it's so much a comment on the 20th century. He's dealing with very serious issues in his best books. And they are also about our modern society. It's a different slant on it. People talk about fantasy as escapist but in point of fact for fantasy to really work it can't be escapist; it must be about real people and real issues. Good and evil are real issues and fantasy in general is the only form of modern fiction that really comes to grips with them. It just depends how you do it."

Science fiction can be said to be entirely a product of language, in that none of what is described in the fiction actually exists – they are entirely verbal constructs. Siegel seems to be very aware of languages.

"I'd like to learn a lot more languages, if I ever had time. I'm fluent in French, I speak a lot of German and Italian, and I have worked as a bi-lingual secretary. I grew up speaking French, because we used to go over to France so often, and we went to places where there weren't any English people, so I played with French children on the beach. It's in the family, too. My sister is married to an Italian who usually speaks English with me, but it does mean I get to practice my Italian from time to time. My German is rather rusty. I was fluent in all three. I just need to get back to using them more often."

The vocabulary in the books is out of the ordinary.

"I like words. I think language and words are exciting. I went on studying German, Italian and French to A-level because it meant I could write free essays in them. Writing freely in another language is like a musician playing a different instrument – when you come back to your own instrument you have a different attitude to it. The way the Germans make word compounds, you try that in English. Atlantean [in *Prospero's Children*] is very closely related to French – because I think French is the most beautiful spoken language to hear – and I'd love to learn Russian, because that sounds wonderful too, and I'd also like to learn an oriental language, or Arabic, because Arabic has such beautiful writing."

Like the vocabulary, the names of the characters are also very evocative.

"Well that's part of the same thing. It's all about language. Most of the names are invented, but they're made up from clear roots. Quite often, I make up the name and then work out the roots afterwards. You're talking to somebody who thinks of a good book title and then thinks up a plot to go with it. Or turns the plot to fit with it."

Prospero's Children is an evocative

Photo: Paul Brazier 2001



example of this skill with naming; it is also a wonderful example of a generic book title, such as Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, or Patricia Wrightson's *An Older Kind of Magic*. There is an overarching idea behind the title, but the narrative itself is still about specific people, and not the idea at all. *Prospero's Children* is the story of Fern Capel. *The Dragoncharmer* is a much more specific title. Not generic in the same way.

"The working title for the third book, *Witch's Honour*, was *Renaissance of a Witch*. I liked it because it's different from other fantasy titles and I prefer

my titles not to sound too much like other fantasy titles. I was wary of using *The Dragoncharmer*, because there are so many dragons. But it's written to look like Snakecharmer, which is where it comes from."

Siegel was quite scathing at this point about several other fantasy writers, while behind her a shelf groaned under the weight of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* videos and rows of books by Terry Pratchett and David Eddings.

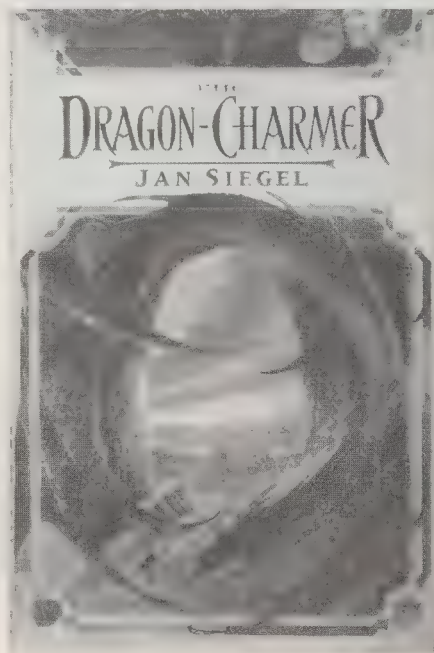
"Eddings is different. Eddings is original. He's not a very good writer, but some of his characterization is excellent, and at his best he's fun – The Belgariad, the Malloreon, the big series he did. His other stuff is just a recycle of the same thing so it doesn't work. I was sent a couple of his to read by my agent when I started writing fantasy, and he said this was what was going on in the genre. It's not really my sort of thing but I did enjoy David Eddings to a point. He has some really good characters and really good ideas.

"Whereas, I'm quite happy to be quoted in print saying that Robert Jordan should be prosecuted by the Tolkien estate, the Frank Herbert estate, David Eddings, he's swiped from them all, and probably from writers whose work I haven't read.

"Jordan also doesn't think properly about names. If they look pretty, I don't think he bothers about how they should be pronounced. There is a character in the books whose name is E-G-W-E-N-E. Now, is that "Egween", which sounds ridiculous; "Eg-vayna"? Any way you pronounce it sounds ridiculous. I always put a really easy phonetic guide to pronunciation at the end of my books. I think it's important, so that people can't mess around. I mean, Tolkien is usually pretty straightforward, although I gather Sauron should be pronounced "Sowron" not "Sore-on" – I think the latter sounds better. But, apart from that, Tolkien's stuff is pretty straightforward.

"George R.R. Martin is really good. He is writing a series of six, unfortunately, and they do leave you hanging, which is not cricket, but nonetheless he's seriously good, he writes well, and he's really interesting. His best character is a deformed dwarf who is a sort of hero who has barely survived the first three books, but he'd better come out on top because he is the best character and we all love him.

"Martin is of the pseudo-mediaeval school, but far and away the best. It's like reading a history, and he does it chain-of-voices – not in the first person, but you get the viewpoint of different characters. This, I'm afraid, means I tend to cheat, because I get into one character and then I leaf



through to find the next section with that character which I shouldn't do because I end up reading the books in a completely disjointed way."

This "chain-of-voices" is certainly beginning to feature in Jan Siegel's work – *The Dragoncharmer* broadens out to encompass several main characters, whereas in *Prospero's Children* it is mostly Fern's story. Indeed, Fern only features in half of *The Dragoncharmer*...

"It's hugely about her character development."

...but she's not in any of the action parts. *The Dragoncharmer* resembles the first book in that it is in two halves with a real-world segment and an unreal-world segment, and Fern only takes part in the other world segment. The real-world segment is almost all about Gaynor, and Fern's brother Will –

"After Fern's unconscious, yes. The third book is very much about Fern again, but there are going to be bits of Will and Gaynor in it too."

There does seem to be a budding romance between these two newly-introduced characters.

"We've got six books here. I hate to tell you, but rule one, it seems to me (and there are exceptions to this and Terry Pratchett is one of them), is – 'never pair off your main characters.' You've got to have the suspense. And the only person I know who gets away with pairing off main characters is Terry Pratchett – and in soap opera, where the characters pair off, break up, pair off, break up, different pair off, break up. I used to enjoy the totally tongue in cheek ones in the 1980s, like *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. They were so ludicrous."

It is easy to wonder if central characters in novels are avatars of their authors, but for all that the series of books seems to be the biography of a precocious and magical girl becoming a woman, it is hard to see Fern as Jan Siegel.

"She's a quiet, fairly bottled-up girl. I was never bottled up. Actually, I have to tell you that under the outgoing surface I am deeply bottled up. I have deep depths..."

This sounded suspiciously like the story in Siegel's first ever novel, *Pzyche* (published as by Amanda Hemingway) where there are deep depths, under which you will find grey crystals which are the most valuable thing in the universe.

"That's it, I'm glad you noticed the Mammonite. Seriously, there are elements of me, yes... but Fern started off as my eldest god-daughter, Kate. The first half of the story of *Prospero's Children* was originally told to my three god-children a long time ago, in

the '80s, when I was looking after them when their parents were away – Kate the eldest was about 14, and I had the three of them in it doing different things, and they all sat there riveted."

Indeed, the first half of *Prospero's Children* does read like a young adult novel of family problems where the strain is manifested by the children in some way – indeed a paperback copy of the novel appeared in the children's section of a local second-hand bookshop recently – but both Siegel and her publisher deny that this is a book for children, pointing out that it gets very dark at times. She claims that it looks like a young adult novel "because you've got a 16-year-old heroine... and the set-up – the family structure, the dead mother, and the idea that the father's girlfriend was someone sinister – is something I came up with in my teens. A lot of my ideas marinade for a very long time and turn up in different forms and in different ways."

The second half reads like a much more mature novel. The two parts feel like two separate stories bound together by a powerful framing device.

"It wasn't a device. That was how it grew. Endings grow. Usually, I know where I'm going to end up in books. I don't always know how I'm going to get there – although I have also recently changed my mind about certain radical features of the book I am writing at the moment. It's quite unusual, after I've started a book, for me to do that, but things do grow."

Siegel is very visually oriented. She is interested in art and says she "draws well." It is quite plain that the two stories in *Prospero's Children* are like two pictures presented in a single

frame in order to make them comment on one another by their juxtaposition.

"Whereas *The Dragoncharmer* is altogether more complex, more broken up. Originally, all the otherworld section was written in one chunk, but it was just too much – it is so so dark in the section under the tree, and it's so weird – and the publishers said it needed breaking up."

And it is this darkness, this harrowing aspect, that makes the target audience adult rather than child/teens.

"The original idea for the series came when I read Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*. That's actually the book it's closest to. Having read that and the sequel, I always regretted that he never went on and told us what happened when they grew up. Susan was just getting really interesting when he dropped the series. She was the one who got power, and who was obviously developing into a witch of sorts, and I thought, 'well supposing you did it differently?'"

"I also used to feel that C.S. Lewis copped out with the *Narnia* books because again you don't know what happens when they grow up. So, I thought, suppose you had characters who had a big adventure when they were children or young adults – and then you have the gap and how it changes them and changes their lives, and then the adventure comes back into their lives when they're older. I really saw it not as a young adults' book but as a book to start a series. It would kick off with an adventure that would be so magical and at the same time so traumatic for the heroine that it would be something that she had to wipe out of her mind. This is what Fern has tried to do at the beginning of *The Dragoncharmer*. I wanted to see how it would feel to grow up with that in your childhood, because I was a highly imaginative child who invented imaginary countries and such things, and, I thought, suppose it was *real* and then you grow up. You can look at it all as heavy symbolism and of the whole thing being symbolic of certain rites of passage; I wanted to see what would happen; Alan Garner and C.S. Lewis had not gone where they could have gone with it. I wanted to make that conventional start of a young adult/childhood adventure, and then grow."

There is a lot of symbolism in Jan Siegel's books –

"Lots. After all, all demons and monsters and things are symbols of things in the human spirit."

...but there's no sense that specific characters represent specific things. It's not allegory.

"No, that's too crude. I tend to draw on traditional myths a lot. I adore



mythology and, as far back as I can remember I've collected mythologies and stories. They're the best stories. They never got printed or even written down; people just told them again and again – they survived in the ether. Those have got to be the strong stories. I always liked Tolkien's image of the tree of stories. I think that the closer a story gets to the trunk, the truer it is. Myths tend to be the ones around and in the trunk. They are the key stories because they're the stories people have told right from the beginning. We don't know how far back they go, but it must be a long way because it's likely that as soon as people could speak they told stories. They must have told stories before they did cave paintings, because you do the paintings to illustrate the stories. You tell stories first."

It becomes more and more apparent that the tree in *The Dragoncharmer* is Yggdrasil.

"Trees are pretty crucial. Big symbol stuff. Yes, it's Yggdrasil, but it's also the tree in paradise, it's the eternal tree. It's changed. That's the other thing about myths that is so fascinating: how they change and the way we interpret them. Like dragons. Dragons started off – well, it depends which part of the world you're in, they're different in China – but in the northern hemisphere dragons presumably came from dinosaur bones, from stories about crocodiles, with various imaginary factors added, but they symbolized evil. They were greed, they were avarice, they were destructive power. As you see in the poem at the beginning of *The Dragoncharmer*. But we became fascinated with them. And by the 20th century the dragon has become a symbol of the free spirit – amoral rather than immoral. It has changed and developed. It still symbolizes huge and destructive power, and potential for evil, but it's not necessarily evil in itself any more. It's become a nature spirit. It's with volcanoes, something we both admire and fear, and are fascinated by. But, equally, there's the free spirit element, so that the evil of the dragon in *The Dragoncharmer* is in how it's used. The dragon is not evil of himself."

With so much Lewis- and Garner-influenced "blending mythology and reality," it is difficult to avoid seeing the stories at least partly as battles between good and evil. Siegel is not doing this, however, in any objective sense.

"It's just that people have evil within them. I believe that your character is never decided, that all your life you make choices, and that you have character and anti-character – if you like, positive and negative spirit; and you choose between them all the time. The soul within you grows as a result of how much you choose character against anti-character, how much you use the positive spirit against the negative spirit, just as the creation of the universe happened because of the imbalance between matter and anti-matter and positive and negative energy –



the soul happens and grows because of the imbalance between character and anti-character. People who go too far into anti-character, or evil, if you prefer to look at it that way, destroy their own souls. Symbolically, there is no such thing as ultimate good; we have the dual elements within us and we have to choose between them. I don't do straightforward good guys and bad guys in quite the same way..."

It is very confusing that there aren't good guys and bad guys, and very unsettling – but it's also clear, because what Siegel does is depict an act and then pick up on motivations which aren't the obvious ones and bring those out. She appears to be interested in real characters, so the people in her books appear to be real people.

"I do think there is such a thing as evil, but I think it is within us. When

people do bad things they justify it to themselves; they convince themselves they are doing it for good reasons. Look at the Nazis: they convinced themselves that they were doing bad stuff for good reasons, whereas I think you *know* when you're doing bad things, and it erodes the soul, because evil is always an easier option, it's always the soft option, the lazy option and very often just being lazy and not doing good can lead you into doing harm or causing harm.

"All through our lives we choose who we are, we create ourselves in the image that we want. We decide whether we're going to be weak or strong. We have the potential for both. As we get older we see in people that we really like that they have a major dark side and this comes out sometimes and they have to fight it. How successfully they fight it and how positive they are in the end is a measure of their humanity. I'm not sure what I believe in, but I do believe in the immortality of the soul and that something like this goes on."

This extract from *Pzyche* seems appropriate here –

"The most important thing is to tell yourself no lies. Varagin did not think he was given to self deception: it was wrong to kill, and he had killed; it was wrong to corrupt the corruptible, to exploit the exploitable, to steal from thieves."

That is typical Siegel. An apparently perfectly straightforward list is suddenly not: why is it wrong to steal from thieves? The misplaced logic trips you up. You get to the end of this sentence and you think, hang on a minute, that doesn't follow at all!

"I like doing that. I don't want to write simple and obvious stuff but I do want to write stuff that is easy... to me, you see, really good stories, great stories, the stories that live forever, are the stories that you desperately adore and want to read again and again, but at the same time tell you all sorts of deep stuff underneath."

This apparently is why Tolkien is so highly prized.

"Exactly. You can pick holes in Tolkien really easily, but the fact remains that there's so much great stuff in there and also he was a fabulous writer. I'm not that keen on Frodo. Golem is the amazing character in that scenario, to me.

"It will be really interesting to see the movie – I can't wait. You have to separate it from the book. It's like when they did *Gormenghast* on the TV. It was a fascinating attempt but didn't really come off – it didn't look right, it wasn't dark enough, it wasn't

gothic enough. The book is much stronger. They really needed to do far more with Gormenghast itself. But it was a great attempt, it was great fun to watch, and I don't think there's anything wrong with a great attempt. I'm all for it.

"And I hope the Tolkien movie will be the biggest thing in movie history, and I think it will. And it will also mean that I can sell my film rights for a hell of a lot of money because they're going to be looking for other grown-up fiction, grown-up fantasy..."

There are lots of smoke and mirrors in Siegel's books.

"There is always something magical and strange about mirrors – mirrors reflect life, but they change it, they distort it. I've just changed my own mirrors. I used to have a little, round, cheap shaving mirror to look in first thing in the morning, and it was so unflattering, so one day I thought, I can't be having with this, and I got out my mother's make-up mirror, which is pretty accurate, but it's not unflattering, it's not a horrible mirror to look in first thing in the morning. Mirrors change the way you look at the world. There's something in C.S. Lewis about it – when you see a landscape reflected in a mirror it's more exciting, it looks somehow deeper and more magical. It's the *Through the Looking Glass* thing.

"But, when you get through the smoke and the mirrors, it shouldn't be a big truth, it should be little bits of the truth peeping through here and there, and if you're any good, it just happens. You don't work at it. It just happens. It's not planned too much. I lay down a skeleton to start off with, and the flesh grows by itself. The same with the characters. I never plan a character. They happen. I get to know them. It's like getting to know a real person, getting to know one of your own characters. You don't think, this character has x, y and z characteristics or anything like that. They just happen.

"It's really interesting for me, for someone who's doing a series, the characters have so much more space to grow and develop and become much more interesting and develop different dimension in different books. I mean, Will in the next book has dumped

being an artist and is going off to be a film cameraman/producer and working abroad, filming documentaries about archaeological excavations and weird tribes and these tie in quite nicely with the otherworldly stuff. But I didn't know Will was going to do that initially. It just sort of happened. And then I thought, no, he's not going to keep up with this artwork, he's not big and serious about it, it's a phase."



Photos: Paul Brazier 2001

At this point we were almost out of time, but, as we were discussing the third novel, Jan Siegel then produced her notebook and read me the book's opening. In the absence of an accompanying short story – she doesn't write short stories – she has kindly consented to it being reproduced here verbatim, although she assures me that the finished version, which was delivered in December 2001, is little different. The manuscript is tiny and handwritten, as close to shorthand as you can get, made up of all kinds of abbreviations etc. And she reads very well.

It was New Year's Eve, 2000. The ancient house of Wrokeby normally brooded in silence under the eaves of the Wrokewood. A haphazard sprawl of huddled rooms, riven staircases, arthritic beams and creaking floors, its thick walls attacked from without by monstrous creepers and gnawed from within by mice, beetles and dryrot. English Heritage had no mandate here. Only shadows prowled the empty corridors. Draughts fingered the

drapes. Water demons gurgled in the plumbing. The Fitzherbert who had built it originally had subsequently knocked it down, raised it, burnt it and built it up again, constructing the priest's hole, burrowing the secret passages and locking unwanted wives and lunatic relatives in the more inaccessible attics, until the family expired of inbreeding, and ownership passed to a private trust. Now it was loaned to members of the *nouveau riche* who enjoyed decrying its many inconveniences and complained when the domestic staff fell through the mouldering floorboards and threatened to sue.

The latest tenant was Caspar Wargrim, an international financier of the type whose fingers were permanently sticky from being poked into so many pies. He liked to mention the house in passing to colleagues and cohorts, but he rarely got around to visiting it. Until tonight. Tonight, Wrokeby was having a ball. Lights invaded the unoccupied rooms and furtive corridors – clusters of candles, fairy stars in flower trumpets, globes that spun and flashed. The shadows were confused, shredded into tissue-thin layers and dancing a tarantella across floor and walls. The glancing illuminations showed costumes historical and fantastical, fantastical/historical, and merely erotic wandering the unhallowed halls. Music blared and thumped from various sources – Abba in the ballroom, Queen in the gallery, garage in the stables. The Norman church

tower, which was the oldest part of the building, had been lined with red lanterns, and stray guests sat on the twisting stairs smoking, snorting and pill-popping, until some of them could actually see the headless ghost of William Fitzherbert watching them in horror from under his own arm. Spiders which had lurked undisturbed for generations scuttled into hiding. In the kitchen a poltergeist was at work among the drinks, adding unexpected ingredients, but no one noticed.

SHARECROPPER

Liz Williams

1 Jirhan slept in the rocks above what had once been the city of Semi-Palatinsk, with the gun tucked hard beneath his hip and his grandfather's Koran clasped to his heart, and there he dreamed of wheat. In his dream, he stood at the very edge of the field and gazed out, marvelling that where there had once been nothing more than dust and scrub, there was now only grain. The fields rolled before him, the wheat as golden-pale as a snow leopard's coat, all the way to the horizon. And in his dream, the perimeter fences and the guards and their guns were gone, blown away on the gentle wind.

Then he saw that a man was walking lightly through the wheat, and it did not bend at his passage. As he drew closer, Jirhan recognized him and his heart leaped, for the man was Jirhan's great-grandfather. Jirhan, dreaming, did not stop to think how he knew this, for he had never seen his great-grandfather in life, and the family photographs had been burned years before, when the law against images had been enforced. The old man carried the book that had made him famous. Jirhan could see his name on the black cover, Bakhtizhan Nazaraev, and the title of the book: *Traditional Agriculture in Uzbekistan: 1850-2010*. Both name and title were written in Russian, a language with which Jirhan's people were no longer so familiar, but the book itself had rested beneath the Koran ever since he could remember; the one work that the family had managed to salvage from the raids 30 years before, when all literature had been banned.

His great-grandfather smiled when he saw the young man, and pointed into the distance beyond Jirhan's shoulder. Jirhan turned, and the sea of wheat swung like a tide before his eyes, catching him up and carrying him back to waking.

The desert air was cold on his face and the stars lay above his head like a bright harvest. It was not yet dawn. Glancing through the rocks, he could see the fences and the guard posts, the turret emblazoned with the NRG logo, and then the grain, just as it had been in his dream. But now he turned away from the endless wheat, and shouldering the gun, he began walking north through the

desert, towards the place where the laboratory was said to lie.

2 Jirhan had now been gone for 50 days, swallowed by the forbidden, endless lands to the north of Tashkent. On the evening of the 51st day, Armin Nazaraev stood high on the minaret, watching for his son. From the pinnacle of the minaret, he could see for miles across the haze of the city; as far as the road that led towards Samarkand, shimmering with dust cast up by the wheels of the NRG tankers and the military traffic. Later, when the sun was nearly gone, the snowlit peaks to the north would turn the colour of rose sherbet and tremble in the distance. These were times when, to Nazaraev, the whole planet seemed to turn on the pivot of the minaret like a wheel around a spoke, and he had to grip the railing tightly to prevent himself from spinning over and falling into the well of the world.

At such times, too, Nazaraev always thought that he could see his son in the streets below. The mirage invariably appeared at the in-between times: the cool dawn or the depths of sunset. Sometimes the figure rode a horse or a camel, sometimes it fled on foot, and once he saw it standing at the wheel of an ancient ATV. Nazaraev knew that it was never real. It always faded just outside the wall of the mosque, like a ghost.

The evening wore on and the curfew fell across Tashkent's old quarter, but Nazaraev still waited on the minaret, listening to the cracked voice of the imam as the old man recited the litany of the muezzin. Allah, the compassionate and the merciful... Prayers, it sometimes seemed to Nazaraev, were all they had left. Amplified by the speakers, the words sank like stones into the still evening air and Nazaraev bowed his head, pleading silently with God to bring Jirhan home. If he brings nothing, if he has failed, if his hands are empty... It no longer matters to me. Only let him be alive... The muezzin drifted away. The imam came to stand by Nazaraev, and placed a gentle hand on his sleeve.

"It's nearly dark," the imam said.

"If he does not come tonight -" Nazaraev said, and heard his words trail away. If he does not come tonight,

then I think he will never come. He is already a week late. He could not bring himself to say the words, but Nazaraev and the imam, Serzhan Beyildi, understood one another's silences.

"Armin, don't worry. The boy can look after himself. You did well with him."

Nazaraev gave a small, bitter smile.

"So did you. You were the one who taught him to read. If it hadn't been for your madrasa, he'd never have found the passage in my grandfather's book."

The imam sighed. "We all do what we can, Armin. We'll need people like your boy. This regime can't last forever, this unholy alliance between our government and the Western biocompanies." He looked towards the road, where the grain trucks still rumbled. "I was born under this regime, and so were you, so how can it seem so unfamiliar, so wrong? How did we come to this pass? A rapacious, starving West and yet another government of peasant boys who make a mockery of Islam. Who ban books and twist the holiest book of all to their own ends, yet sell drugs to black marketeers and everything else around us to foreign multinationals... Hypocrites and fools. I haven't been outside this town for 20 years, and I'm 56 now, an old man. I doubt I'll ever see the mountains again. I envy your son, in a way." He touched Nazaraev's sleeve. "Don't worry about Jirhan. He's KGS trained, he knows a lot of tricks."

"But that's what worries me, don't you see? If he's been captured and they find out he was with the Specials..."

"They won't. And anyway, even if he is taken, why should they make the connection? We set him up with a new identity, didn't we? We were as thorough as thieves. As far as the KGS knows, Jirhan Nazaraev is dead."

Beyildi's grip tightened on Nazaraev's arm, then the imam turned and made his way slowly down the stairs of the minaret. Nazaraev followed, moving carefully, with an old man's slowness. And then, as the filigreed door closed behind them, he heard a shout from the northern gate of the mosque. Hope hammered at Nazaraev's heart. He turned, and began to stumble towards the gate through the half-dozen students hurrying out of the mosque's madrasa. A name was spreading like wildfire: Jirhan.

Nazaraev's first thought, however, was that it was not Jirhan at all, but a stranger. The man at the gate of the mosque was surely old, crouched gasping on the steps, but then he glanced up to meet his father's eyes, and Nazaraev recognized him. He stepped forward and took his son's hands. The crowd clustered around them, clamouring.

"Jirhan? Did you find the place? Did you bring anything back? What happened, Jirhan?"

Jirhan Nazaraev opened his mouth to answer, but the old imam raised his hand.

"Enough, enough! Do you want to attract the KGS with your racket? Let the boy see his father and get a decent meal inside him. There'll be time enough for your questions later."

Murmuring, the crowd drew aside and Jirhan followed his father through the evening streets, keeping to the shadows. As they hurried, a helicopter whirled overhead, searchlights panning across the old town. Jirhan stood

blinking upwards like a rabbit, and his father drew him swiftly back into a doorway.

"Jirhan?" Nazaraev could not quite keep the sharpness from his voice.

"Sorry," the young man muttered. He shook his head, as if trying to clear it, and Nazaraev noted with a sinking heart the bewilderment in the boy's eyes. The helicopter passed over again; illuminating the minaret.

"It's just the curfew sweep, it's nothing to worry about. You used to do it yourself, remember?" Nazaraev murmured, trying not to sound as uneasy as he felt. "Come on. Let's get you inside."

As they approached the house, Nazaraev's wife hastened into the courtyard, the youngest girl limping at her skirts. Her mouth opened in a soundless zero as she saw her son. Gaping like a fish, she embraced him, while the child looked on wide eyed.

"Inside," Gulzhan Nazaraeva commanded, wiping her eyes with her apron. Jirhan stepped into the courtyard and his brothers rushed out of the house. The young men stood grinning foolishly and slapping Jirhan on the back.

"The bread!" Gulzhan said, and ran for the kitchen. Nazaraev knew that these first few moments of hospitality were sacred under the will of Allah, but he couldn't keep the question from his eyes. Jirhan saw what was in his father's face, and seemed to straighten. The bemused look left him and he gave a slight, grim nod. Nazaraev felt the breath rush out of him. Until now, he realized, he had not truly believed that Jirhan stood a chance of success.

Gulzhan returned, bearing the traditional lepeschka loaf that she had bought on the day of Jirhan's departure, weeks before. She thrust the round loaf, stamped with the hallmark of NRG-Grain, towards her son, and Jirhan took a piece. It was as fresh and easily broken as though it had been baked only an hour before. Nazaraev remembered his grandfather years before, mumbling at the soft bread and telling the children how the loaves baked in his day had been as hard as iron the next morning. And he remembered his grandfather throwing the soft patented bread to the kites which clustered along the courtyard wall, calling it a sin in the face of Allah. Sudden tears welled in Nazaraev's eyes; his grandfather would have been proud of Jirhan, if he'd lived to see the boy. But he had died in his 50s of a tumour, like most folk then, and now. The young men tore the bread between them and Jirhan handed a piece to his father. Nazaraev let the fragment rest on his tongue for a moment; it tasted of nothing, of air.

In the moment before they went through into the main room, Jirhan turned and placed something in his father's hands: a heavy rectangle, wrapped in thick cloth.

"Here."

"Where's the best place for it?" Nazaraev whispered.

"Somewhere neither hot nor cold. Somewhere dry."

Nazaraev took the container into the workshop that adjoined the courtyard and placed it on a shelf. But before he left, he unwrapped the cloth and stood staring down at the container. It was made of some kind of metal, with a smooth, grey surface, and a transparent panel at one end. A faint iridescence showed where it

caught the light. It was of a different order of technology to the machine parts that lay around the floor of the workshop and which were mere scraps welded together in the approximation of a whole. The container was flawless; a gift from another world.

Nazaraev bent forward and peered through the panel. A cluster of something pale lay within, nested in a honeycomb of cells. Nazaraev sighed, and it was only when the panel misted over that he realized he had been holding his breath. Wrapping the container in the cloth once more, he returned to his family and celebration.

Nazaraev had decided not to press the boy for immediate answers, but the younger lads had no such inhibitions. They leaned across the table to touch Jirhan's hands, as if checking that he was real, and they clamoured questions.

"So how was it? Did you really find the laboratory? Are the stories real?"

"What are the people like? Are they like us? Have they changed, as the southerners say? Are they really taller than trees and stronger than lions?"

For the first time, Jirhan laughed, but it sounded raw.

"Yes, I really went to the laboratory; it really does exist. It's somewhere in the wasteland to the north of Semi-Palatinsk, where they say that air still sparkles and burns. It isn't true. The climate is soft and mild, and I saw a wheatfield 500 kilometres long, drifting into the distance like a Russian girl's golden hair."

Jirhan's brothers' eyes grew round, and Nazaraev suppressed a smile. His eldest son had always known how to spin a good tale.

"Five hundred kilometres? Of wheat?"

"Of growing grain, yes." He leaned across the table and tapped what remained of the lepeschka loaf. "Where bread like this comes from."

"I know that," the smallest boy said with scorn. "Everyone knows that. It's why you went, isn't it?"

And Jirhan nodded. "Yes. It's why I went."

After the meal, Nazaraev followed Jirhan out to the workshop and took the container from its hiding place. Father and son stood looking down at it as it lay in Nazaraev's hands.

"Such a small thing," Nazaraev said, half to himself. Jirhan nodded.

"It doesn't look like much, does it? It nearly cost me my life." His mouth tightened, as if in memory. Nazaraev said nothing, and after a moment the young man went on, "You've no idea, the kind of security they've got up there. On the fields, I mean. And it goes on forever: there's a watchtower every half kilometre or so, with heat sensors and monitors and guards with guns. Father, when I first joined the special forces, I thought I knew it all. But I've never seen anything like the security they've got on the NRG fields." Jirhan ran a careful finger along the surface of the box. "We'll have to take good care of this. Separate some, and hide the rest."

"So what about the laboratory?"

"It's there. Just as the old stories said. There wasn't anyone there; it was deserted. I found this—" He weighed the box in his hand. "—in an empty room filled with dust."

"Forgotten," Nazarbaev whispered. The pride came

back into Jirhan's eyes.

"Not by my grandfather. He remembered... I've said a prayer for his soul every night of my life. It was as though he was with me on my journey."

"He was," Nazarbaev said softly. "Now. I need to speak to Imam Beyildi; he's seeing the others tonight."

Jirhan smiled. "It's the spring equinox tomorrow. Navrus. Not such bad timing, then."

"It's a good time," his father said. "Time for the planting; time for a summer harvest." Their eyes met.

"A good time," Jirhan echoed, but suddenly he did not sound so sure.

3 That night, home in his own bed, Jirhan once more dreamed of wheat. He stood again at the edge of the field, gazing out across the grain. A locust whirled across his vision, towards the wheat, but as soon as its ungainly flying form touched the air above the grain, it buzzed and fell. Jirhan stepped forwards to look, but the locust was already decaying, killed by whatever genes had been implanted in the crop. And suddenly he saw that the magnificent field was crawling with life: scorpions clustered upon every stem like spiny fruit, and he could see inside the stalks, too, where the black specks of artificial diseases crawled like lice. Jirhan turned in disgust from the field and looked down at his hand, to where a single golden seed rested in his palm. Stooping, he tucked it into the soil and watched it as it grew. It was a pale, pallid shoot, but it belonged to no-one, contained nothing except its own frail strands of DNA. He looked up to see his great-grandfather staring at the shoot, but the old man's face was sombre, and the cancer that had killed him was clearly visible, hanging from his throat like a scorpion on the grain.

Jirhan woke up with a gasp. The muezzin rang out across the silent town, and he rolled automatically out of bed to pay his devotions. It was still and cold and dark. As he crawled gratefully back under the covers he realized that it was Navrus, the equinox, and a moment later, his father was knocking softly on the door.

"Jirhan? We should go."

Following his father through the door, Jirhan stepped into the courtyard to see a figure in the shadows. It was the imam. Jirhan clasped his hand, but the imam did not speak. He was looking at the box, which Nazaraev was carrying carefully from its hiding place.

"You're both going?" the imam whispered.

"No," Jirhan said quickly, before his father could speak. "I'll go alone. It's too risky, otherwise."

"Yes," Nazaraev said, as though Jirhan had said nothing. "We're both going."

Jirhan started to argue but the imam took his arm in a surprisingly firm grip.

"Don't argue. If your father wants to go, then neither you or I will be able to stop him. It's your legacy, after all — both of you. Your great-grandfather would have wanted this. And anyway," he added, "Your father knows the old fields, and you don't. They're hard to find — do you think you can just walk up to them, up the mountain? If you could have done that, then you could have gone there straightaway and not risked coming back into Tashkent."

We talked about all this before you left, Jirhan."

Jirhan fell silent, knowing that the imam was right, and besides, in an hour it would be dawn. They could not afford the time to argue.

"You've arranged a vehicle?" he asked.

"Yes. You'll find it at the end of Abai Street, past the roadblock behind the market. You'll have to get past the guards, though – you should get there in time for the changeover. But you won't have long."

Tashkent was quiet, still under the pre-dawn curfew. They saw only one man, a cleric, and not one of the imam's people, going into the mosque on Ferghana Road. Jirhan and Nazaraev crouched beneath a wall. Jirhan could not help feeling that the box was emitting its own faint, betraying light.

"Pity we can't do this within the city walls," his father murmured.

"There's nowhere big enough to grow a crop, and how would we hide it?"

Nazaraev did not reply. They'd already had this discussion a hundred times. They slunk around past the rows of whitewashed houses. Starlings began to shriek in the trees with the coming dawn, and Jirhan wondered what this neighbourhood must have sounded like in his great-grandfather's youth: clucking hens, ducks, goats. Each house with its own small garden: its own cherries and apples, carrots and cabbages. And now they were forced to buy everything in the sanctioned marketplace; the vegetables and fruit bursting with obscene health, the meat glistening with by-products. A century ago, Jirhan's countrymen were smuggling gold and drugs and guns, and now their ambitions had contracted down to black-market carrots.

They had reached the guardpost. Jirhan could see the guards, huddled in the chilly light. One of them lit a cigarette and Jirhan grimaced: that came from the West, too. The old local tobaccos had been made illegal years ago. The guards were walking towards a truck; their backs were turned. Jirhan and Nazaraev slid painfully under the razorwire and rolled down into the muddy ditch.

"What now?" Nazaraev whispered.

Jirhan motioned to the left. "Along the ditch." Halfway between one outpost and the next, a gully led down to the narrow river. The imam's vehicle would be waiting on the other side, out of sight in the bushes, but Jirhan was nervous. Things rarely went to plan. They scrambled along the ditch, and just before they reached the halfway point Jirhan heard the siren signalling the end of curfew. The sun was just touching the edge of the distant mountains, spilling light over the world. They raced down the gully, and threw themselves into the muddy waters of the Chirchik. It was neither deep nor wide; in minutes they were across and into the trees. The vehicle, an old army jeep, was waiting. The man inside wore the uniform of the Uzbekistan Defence Corps and Jirhan's heart skipped a beat, but then the man turned and he recognized his old schoolfriend from the madrasa.

"Shoqan!"

Shoqan smiled, then gestured. "Get in the back under the seat. There's a false base, in case anyone looks. I've got

papers as far as Yangiabad; we'll take a side road off before we reach the village. After that, you'll have to walk."

"We'll follow the river," Nazaraev said. "It takes us up into the Chatkal."

The journey fell into a pattern: start, stop, start, stop. Jirhan counted 20 roadblocks between Tashkent and Angren. It was close to noon when the road beneath them, always bad, began to worsen. Jirhan was able to peer through the gaps in the vehicle's floor, to where the dusty, pot-holed track span away. The air, filtered in through the vehicle's sides, became thick and stifling with coal dust from the local mines. Finally, they slowed and stopped. The seat was hauled up, releasing them into the clear coldness of the mountains.

"Go," Shoqan said. "And keep as close to shelter as you can." Without waiting for Jirhan's thanks, he jumped back in the vehicle and span the wheel. Jirhan and his father trudged stiffly across the stony plateau, to where the Angren river tumbled between steep banks. They began to follow it up into the heights, and gradually the air became colder and the trees more thickly scattered.

"Are you sure this is a good place?" Jirhan asked. "Won't it be too cold?"

His father shook his head. "Too cold here, but the path drops down into the pastures, the old zhelau. They're sheltered. Good growing land, and –" the sound reverberated from the rocks, sending a flock of birds whirling into the sky.

"Down!" Jirhan pushed his father to the ground, as the helicopter roared overhead, its dragonfly shadow racing over the riverbank. They were in full view, and in the next moment, Jirhan knew that they had been seen. The helicopter turned. Nazaraev scrambled to his feet. They splashed across the river and up the other bank, running across the open land towards the trees.

"You are trespassing on government property! The penalty for violation is death!" Distorted by the loud hailer, the voice echoed from the mountain walls. Gunfire spat a line across the earth, and Nazaraev stumbled. Filled with a sick dismay, Jirhan turned, but his father was already clambering up. Blood stained his side. Jirhan slid an arm around him and dragged him into the trees. The helicopter span overhead. Bullets splintered the pines, sending a resinous waft through the air. Jirhan and Nazaraev reached the end of the trees, wavered on the edge of a steep, fronded gully, then plunged downwards. They plummeted through tall bracken and stunted trees, into a thin line of cold water. Panting, bleeding, their clothes torn, they looked up. The helicopter was nowhere to be seen.

"Given up?" Nazaraev asked, hoarsely and hopefully.

"Maybe. Perhaps they took us for poachers. You're hurt."

Nazaraev grimaced. "My ribs. It swiped me. It didn't go in. We've got to go on."

"Dad–"

"Didn't the imam tell you not to argue?" Nazaraev's face was as tight as a fist. Jirhan opened his mouth to speak, but his father was already up and heading through the gully, brushing low through the bracken. Jirhan, still clutching the box, followed.

Towards the early part of the afternoon, they reached

the high pasture. There had been no further sign of the helicopter, but Jirhan and Nazaraev kept as far out of sight as they could. If it had not been for the constant threat, Jirhan would have enjoyed the walk: the silver birches marching down the slopes, the grass filled with flowers. He wondered how long it had been since anyone had come up here. The government had said this land was poisoned, but there was no sign of it here. The sloping aprons of the zhelau, the old pasture, slid gently down the lower slopes. Once, Jirhan knew, this grazing land would have been filled with cattle or horses, but now all the herds were strangely bred, and under UDC control. At last they reached a long slope, sheltered by a ridge of high ground. Nazaraev pointed.

"Here."

"Are you sure?"

His father nodded. Together they scraped back the earth to form a long oblong and then, carefully, Jirhan opened the box. The grain rested inside, looking as though it had just been scattered from a stem of wheat.

"It's an experimental strain in itself, of course," Nazaraev said. "Engineered for strength, according to grandfather's notes."

"But not patented. It's strong, it will grow, and it won't last for just a single generation, either. It can be harvested, planted on. This is just to get it started." They stared at the grain, marvelling, and then they put two handfuls in the ground and covered it over. Then repeated it, further down the slope, until ten oblongs

marked the ground, hidden by the long grass. They stood, and looked at one another.

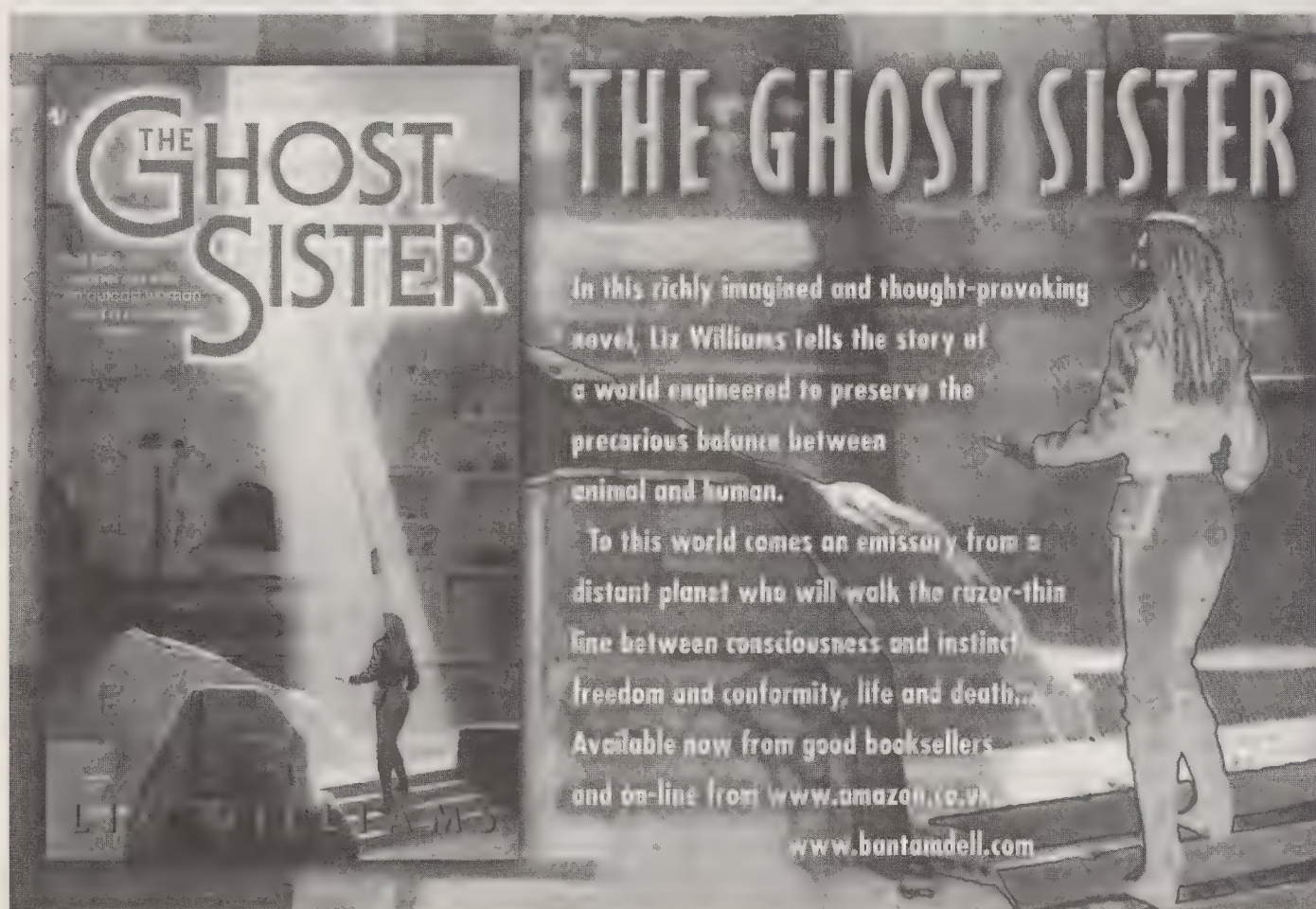
"I'll go with you to the rendezvous," Jirhan said. "Just in case. Come and see me in the summer."

"You're sure you'll be all right up here?" Nazaraev said.

"I'll be all right. It's unlikely anyone will trek up here, and I'll avoid the helicopter sweeps, stay out of sight. But someone needs to stay and tend the grain. And in August, we'll harvest it, and so will all the others. And then we'll try and find a field."

They returned to the rendezvous place, where Shoqan was impatiently waiting. Jirhan embraced his father, feeling the blood stiff on Nazaraev's shirt. Nazaraev's scarf was still bound around the graze, and when Jirhan pulled away, he saw for the first time that there was a swelling on the side of his father's neck. Nazaraev saw him looking, but neither of them said anything. When they had gone, it was already twilight. Jirhan made his way back through the trees, now humming with early cicadas, to where the bare earth waited, like a grave.

Liz Williams lives in Brighton but has travelled widely. Her previous stories in this magazine were "A Child of the Dead" (#123), "The Unthinkables" (#151), "Dog Years" (#152), "Adventures in the Ghost Trade" (#154), "The Blood Thieves" (#160) and "Mr Animation and the Wu Zhiang Zombies" (#168). Her debut novel, *The Ghost Sister* (2001; see review in this issue), was recently selected as a *New York Times* notable sf book of the year, and her second novel is due out from Bantam Books (USA) in the spring of 2002.



ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

More tepid J. K. Rowling news: a librarian reports that the villain in an early Ellery Queen crime story, "The Adventure of the Seven Black Cats" (1934), is called Harry Potter. Fresh ammunition for the egregious Nancy Stouffer's plagiarism claims! Now she can argue that Rowling also stole from Queen...

T ZERO

Brian Aldiss mourned the fall of the House of Stratus. "Stratus was a brave new idea, print-on-demand, cutting out old-fashioned warehouse costs. My belief is that they printed too much too fast. At least before they went down the tubes they brought out about 25 of my back-list titles, elegantly published. Who else, I ask you, would have been crazy enough to do that?" But Stratus avoided bankruptcy, "rescued" by former CEO David Lane, says *The Bookseller*. It's uncertain whether creditors will get any actual money.

Terry Brooks achieved supreme topicality in these days of biowar panic, with a new fantasy novel, "The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara Book 2," whose title is... *Antrax*.

Ken Follett, at a London charity auction, bid £2,200 to feature as a character in Terry Pratchett's next novel. "I want to appear as a giant but Terry is making no promises. All he asked me is how I want to die, which is a little disconcerting." But ever so characteristic.

Josh Kirby (1928-2001), the sf/fantasy artist famously responsible for many Discworld covers and a great deal of other memorable genre artwork going back to 1954, died unexpectedly on 23 October. He was 72. I enjoyed working with Josh – a charm-

ing and modest man – on the Paper Tiger collection of his paintings for which I wrote the text, and it feels very strange to be told that his last commissioned Discworld painting was for the quizbook I delivered on the day he died. Goodbye, Josh.

John Cunningham Lilly (1915-2001), the experimental psychologist whose work on dolphin intelligence and communication inspired several sf stories, died on 30 September.

China Miéville passed on a hot rumour about the name of Osama bin Laden's terror network. Apparently "Al-Qaeda" has no political precedent in Arabic, and so baffled Middle East experts "until someone pointed out that a very popular book in the Arab world, Arabs apparently being big readers of translated sf, is Asimov's *Foundation*, the title of which is translated as 'Al-Qaeda'."

Mike Moorcock reports from darkest Texas: "Turned on the TV this am. An ad – If your child has been introduced to Satanism by Harry Potter books call this number... As far as I can tell it's a commercial exorcism outfit. See what happens when you deregulate. Come to think of it I could simply pass the number on to the various loonies who have been possessed by Elric. Elric seems to behave very uncharacteristically while possessing people, I've noticed – rape, ritual murder, torture... I've always prided myself that I'm an influence on the young, but it's getting the bastards to fall on their swords that's the hard bit."

Sandy Sladek sends a topical John Sladek anecdote: "I remember one time after we had returned from our second trip to England, John was coughing in the airport. (Any change in temperature or location could trigger a coughing episode.) At any rate, John noticed someone staring at him and immediately said to me in a loud voice, 'Ever since we left Ebola, I can't seem to get rid of this annoying cough.'"

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

World Fantasy Awards 2001. Novel (tie) *Declare*, Tim Powers; *Galveston*, Sean Stewart. NOVELLA *The Man on the Ceiling*, Steve Rasnic Tem & Melanie Tem. SHORT "The Potawatowmie Giant," Andy Duncan. ANTHOLOGY *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas. COLLECTION *Beluthahatchie*, Andy Duncan. ARTIST Shaun Tan. SPECIAL AWARD (PRO) Tom Shippey, for *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. SPE-

CIAL (NON-PRO) Bill Sheehan, for *At the Foot of the Story Tree: An Inquiry into the Fiction of Peter Straub*. LIFE ACHIEVEMENT Philip José Farmer and Frank Frazetta.

Censorship Horror! John Norman castigated the 2001 World SF Convention as "puritans and censors, excluders, hypocrites, slanderers, and liars." Goodness knows how he'd have phrased it if they'd done more than decline to invite him to appear on panels.

Last Straw. Four American sf film fans are suing Warner Bros and 20th Century Fox for their publicity use of reviews the fans reckon must have been obtained by bribery. In their lawyer's words, "They were sick and tired of looking at movie ads which say that *Battlefield Earth* is the greatest movie since *Star Wars*." Who will do the same for excess use of "Comparable to Tolkien at his best?"

First Ever? The *Radio Times* Web-club newsletter revealed the little-suspected nonexistence of the *SF Encyclopedia*: "Following the success of the film guide, RT has a new one for you: the *Radio Times Guide to Science Fiction* – the first book covering not just science-fiction films, not just science-fiction television but all of it, including the greatest radio tales of them all." All of sf, that is, except for obsolete media like books. A correspondent describes this reference as "a quickly cobbled together bunch of thumbnail reviews."

Adams Award. The BBC's first Douglas Adams award for radio comedy was presented on 30 October to Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding, whose show *The Boosh* (surreal rather than sf) airs on Radio 4.

Thog's Masterclass. Dept of Biometaphorical Research. "Cooks were the mitochondria of humanity; they had their own separate DNA, they floated in a cell and powered it but were not really of it." "He'd lived with the affliction of this debt until it had assumed the character of a neuroblastoma so intricately implicated in his cerebral architecture that he doubted he could survive its removal." (all Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, 2001) "It was Mark Beasley, a photographer for the *Globe* who wore a beard that reached the middle of his chest and was nicknamed the Beast." (Brendan DuBois, *Resurrection Day*, 1999) Dept of Heartfelt Romance. "I wanted him in my mouth, aquiver, like the slippery muscle I'd once had a gloved hand on in an emergency room – a fibrillating heart." (Elizabeth Knox, *Black Oxen*, 2001)

THE YELLOW FLOWER

Don Webb

My love life had been at best a joke and at worst a series of really bitter tragedies, until I met Marilyn. It might seem odd, but I can't recall how we met, we had fallen so slowly in love. I suppose I had met her at a friend's party, or maybe in the grocery store, or more likely still at a used bookstore. There had been dinners and movies and lovemaking. There had been long walks at the lake, long drives during the central Texas wildflower season, long visits to galleries and museums. And somewhere sometime during these easy afternoons and hot nights, my heart opened and my defences relaxed and I was in love.

Marilyn taught at the community college. She had a great mane of blonde hair, wet brown eyes, creamy skin and a very dry sense of humour. She liked jeans more than dresses, experimental music concerts more than bars, flowers more than paintings. She was my age, had her own long series of disappointments, and she had one thing that I have never had. Peace.

She knew who she was and what she wanted.

One day I asked about this, about the source of her wisdom. We were at my favourite Indian restaurant enjoying Tandoori chicken, and making afterglow eyes at each other.

"I learned everything I needed to know from *The Yellow Flower*," she said.

"Which is?" I asked.

"You know, the bestseller about ten years ago about finding what you want. By Lily Brockden. Everybody talked about it at the time."

I was comfortable enough in our relationship to confess my ignorance of the book. I've never been much for self-help or pop psychology, but I allowed that if it had done Marilyn that much good that I ought to at least read it. She, of course offered to loan me her copy. We went by her apartment after dinner and I picked it up.

The Yellow Flower was a thick, much-worn paperback with a glossy scarlet cover with a large yellow flower and white raised print. Marilyn had read the book so often that the red metallic cover was a mass of wrinkles, the raised white letters soiled and dingy, and the spine of the

book broken through and through. The back cover had a picture of Lily, who looked a little like Marilyn, but older and wiser – perhaps it was just the glasses. The edges of the book were dirty, and there were many pages dog-eared. Flipping through, I saw that many passages had been highlighted. The first few pages were quotes in 14-point type from movie stars and popular scientists explaining how the book had changed their lives. It was the kind of thing that I wouldn't even read on a plane.

I read the back cover at stoplights on the way home:

Lily Brockden Ph.D. has spent many years in the Rasipuram Krishnaswami ashram in Malgudi where she learned the great truths of Vira Shaivism, or that the subjective world can be made to overcome the objective world by certain practises. She has used her training in western psychology to make Krishnaswami's teaching available to modern Americans. She is currently engaged in creating a series of workshops to share her experiences with a growing number of devoted followers.

No doubt rather lucratively. But nevertheless I was resolved to read the book. Soon. I tossed it in my home in-box, along with the gas bill.

The next day at work I asked my cubicle mate if he had ever heard of Lily Brockden.

"Yeah, vaguely," Matthew said. "Didn't she write *The Big Dandelion* or something, some cross between Carlos Castaneda and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*?"

"My girlfriend is very interested in her."

"I think books like that are a disease. Those people who write such books have powers all right, the power to make your money disappear. Watch out that you don't sign up for weekend lectures."

I meant to read the book, or at least scan it that night, so I could comment on some good idea in it. I figured I would say something nice, and then give the book back and tell Marilyn that I wasn't too interested. I was fairly sure that I didn't want to go where the book might lead. But instead I turned on the TV and *The Simpsons* got my interest.

On Wednesday I had a date with Marilyn. We played miniature golf and had coffee afterward. Things were going pretty smooth until she asked, "So have you had a chance to read *The Yellow Flower* yet?"

"Not all of it, I'm pretty busy this week, getting ready for a seminar in Dallas next week."

"Well, how far have you got?"

"The first three chapters."

"It gets easier going after that. But I loved in Chapter Three where she starts talking about managing synchronicities. It changed the way I deal with the world."

"Yeah, that was pretty exciting all right."

So I definitely resolved to read the book cover-to-cover before the next date.

And I failed in my resolve. I had a panic attack. What if I read the book and I hated it? What if I thought it was really kooky? What if it made me think Marilyn was really kooky? I wasn't much of a reader anyway. I usually killed off a mystery or two a year. I preferred popular history.

Our next date was a Friday date. Well, Friday dates had always ended up in bed. I had meant to at least scan the book, maybe read the last chapter. That was the ticket, I could at least get a grasp on the words Maya and Nirvana. But I was buttonholed on my way out of the office, and I had to shower and dress and nothing was happening on time. So I didn't get a chance to even look at the book.

We had a lovely dinner in south Austin at Bubba's Cajun Retreat. Brockden had a thing about New Orleans and Marie Leveau as well. The retreat was next to a Half Price Books, one of the largest used bookstores in the city. Marilyn suggested that we browse a while there.

We walked over. The night was young and warm, not unlike one of Marilyn's kisses. We prowled through the store, and found ourselves in front of the paranormal section. Sure enough, there were about ten copies of various editions of *The Yellow Flower*.

Marilyn said, "I don't know how anybody could even bring themselves to sell a copy. I bet that's why you are taking so long with my copy."

"It is hard to part with."

"Well, don't keep it too long, I like to refer to it when I make decisions reflecting where my life is going. Remember, 'When you discover that changing perception is the work you are here for, it becomes necessary to have some consistent belief pattern to tie that perception to.'"

I had no idea what that meant, other than I should get the book back to her.

After we left the store Marilyn said she was tired and wanted to go home, alone.

I went home and did something I rarely do. I killed a six pack and watched porno videos. To hell with perception, I would read about it tomorrow.

I felt guilty and sick the next day. I intended to read the book, but I didn't feel fresh enough to try and bend my mind around anything new. I spent the morning fixing my car and the afternoon trying to figure what extra tax form I needed for that 20 dollars of oil money I got

every other year because my great grandfather had been born in Oklahoma.

Marilyn called and tersely asked what I really thought of the book.

I said I had never read anything like it, and it would take some time for the ideas to filter into my world. The book, I told her, was like her something totally new to my experience.

She sounded relieved. She used the book as a sort of test to see whether she should pursue relationships.

After I hung up I felt really guilty. It wasn't as if she was asking me to fly to the Moon, all she wanted was for me to read a little book that had meant a lot to her. She was wonderful, maybe I should read it. She wasn't a glassy-eyed cultist, she had a sense of humour, and she had a neat funky apartment. She was great in bed. She was also great at listening to my fears. I talked to her about my fears of my mother growing old, that someday I would have to deal with Mom's estate, my fear of growing old. My fear of being really sick sometime with no one to take care of me. I could share little things with her, a bluebonnet just beginning to bloom, the sight of a balloon in the sky. We could laugh at little things like a waiter's mannerisms, or roll our eyes at the stupidity of a ticket taker at our favourite movie.

She was important. What the hell was wrong with me? I would read the book tomorrow.

On Sunday my mother called and told me she was sick. I spent the morning on the phone to my brothers deciding what we should do if Mom's flu got worse. I would visit her first, then Jason then Charles. We plotted and planned in our pessimism turning a head cold into pneumonia.

It depressed me, and I took a nap Sunday afternoon.

Early Sunday evening Matthew called. He had just bought a new board game and wanted to get three others players to try it out. It was great fun and lasted till midnight.

A couple of days went by before I even thought of *The Yellow Flower*. Mom's illness had thankfully been slight, but work had turned into a bugbear. I had not only put the book out of my mind, I had even put Marilyn out of my mind. That I could be so distracted hit me like a rock. I wrote a note to myself to read *The Yellow Flower* the minute I got home, and pasted the note to my briefcase.

When I got home, I went to my in-box.

The Yellow Flower was gone. I had my gas bill, a power bill, a catalogue I wanted to look at that sold police gear – I had been thinking of buying some handcuffs for Marilyn...

I knew I had laid the book there, I remembered it very well. So I began by looking under my desk, then both bookcases, then the bathrooms, then under the bed, then in my car. Then anywhere I could think of. I spent all night looking for the book.

Now I had never given Marilyn a key, so I assumed that she hadn't stolen it back, but as the night grew into morning I began thinking all sorts of paranoid thoughts. Perhaps she had broken into the house, or maybe some-

body jealous of my new-found love had done the deed, or some old girlfriend, or perhaps some mystic society lead by Lily Brockden herself.

I would have to get another copy of the book. Perhaps I could give Marilyn a new copy. I could tell her that hers fell apart, or that I had spilled coffee on it, or that I wanted her to have a new copy. That would work: I would buy her the most expensive copy that I could.

I must have looked like death warmed over the next day. I wore the same clothes I had worn to work the day before and I hadn't had any sleep in the interim. I started calling bookstores.

Nobody had copies of *The Yellow Flower*. One store had a sequel written by one of Brockden's followers, *The Yellow Flower Workbook*. Everyone apparently felt the need to tell me stories of what a great seller it had been a few years ago. People would buy four, five copies at a time. If I only wanted a reading copy I could certainly find it in any used bookstore.

"It used to be quite a cult object, then suddenly no one was interested."

About noon my boss called me into her office. She told me I looked terrible, and asked if I was sick. I told her I had the flu, and she told me to go home for Christ's sakes.

There was a message on my answering machine, but the machine had slightly screwed up and I couldn't make it out. I thought it was from Marilyn. I lacked the courage to tell her I had lost the book, and I was still sure that I hadn't lost it. So I didn't call her back.

I did drive across town to the Half Price bookstore. I went to the New Age section, and there was a great gap where the books had been.

I asked a moon-faced clerk about the books. She shrugged pointing out the number of titles they had for sale.

The next day at work all I could think about was the book. It was embarrassing. My keyboard beeps at me when I make an error. It practically rang all day, and I felt everybody was looking at me when I went to the bathroom or had to pick up something from the Copy Centre. I was too embarrassed to go to lunch. I would have to get Marilyn another copy of the book. Perhaps I could come up with a good excuse. I wasn't just worried about hurting our relationship, I genuinely loved Marilyn. I didn't mean to lose the book that seemed to mean more to her than anything else.

I compiled a list of used bookstores to check after work.

They were all across town, so I wouldn't have a chance to visit all of them. I would go to the ones in the trendier parts of town first. People with money are more apt to read (and discard) self-help books. People without money wouldn't have the time to read such foam from the stew-pot of civilization, but if they did read it, they were less likely to discard the investment carelessly.

I went to four bookstores, with no luck.

Tomorrow was Friday. I had to cancel my date. I tried calling all day to leave a message at Marilyn's. She must have forgotten to turn on her answering machine. I started to call her at work and realized that I couldn't

remember where she worked. It was a bank, I thought, or maybe a credit union. I realized what a jerk I was. I knew so little about her. She knew where I liked to eat, talked about my job, and knew when my birthday was. I knew nothing.

I began thinking about how my life had changed since she had come into it. I dressed better. I took better care of myself, she had got me on vitamins and herbal teas and the whole business. I got more done at work, so I didn't have to slave blurry-eyed with lots of overtime. In the year before I had started going with her I had seen two movies, this year about 20. It wasn't just with her, I developed a social life with Matthew and some of the guys – little stuff, board games, a weekend road trip to see the Dr Pepper museum in Waco. I had been without energy until she came along. I was dead in a suburban coffin. Jeez, what would she think of me if she found I lost the book? What would I be if I lost her?

Even though I couldn't reach her by phone, I went direct from work to the bookstores. The first three were negative, so I was desperate at the last. It was a pretty haphazard store to benefit the public library system. The volunteer looked a little like Marilyn so I felt even guiltier. The store wasn't arranged well so I knew I had to go through every single book.

The volunteer walked over. "Excuse me may I help you?"

"Do you have a copy of *The Yellow Flower* by Lily Brockden?"

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that title, sir."

"Every used bookstore is supposed to have a copy. It was a bestseller in the mid-1980s."

"I'm afraid I don't follow bestsellers, sir."

The little smartass went back to her counter. I kept looking and perhaps my obvious desperation made her take pity on me.

"What's the book about, sir?"

"I don't know, I've never read it. A friend of mine loaned me her copy and I lost it."

I could see I was becoming less pitiful and more loathsome in her eyes. I should never talk to people in shops.

I continued, "The book was about Brockden's experiences in India. In Malgudi."

"Malgudi? Someone is having you on. Malgudi is a fictional town that one of my favourite novelists made up. Narayan. Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan." She said the last name very slowly as though it would open doors for me.

"Yeah," I said. "That was the name of Brockden's guru, Rasipuram Krishnaswami."

"No, no, sir. Here let me show you."

She fished out a paperback called *The English Teacher* by Narayan. "There is no Malgudi."

"But the book jacket said she had learned there. Learned something about Maya."

"That's a Sanskrit word. It means illusion. Like stage magic, I think. Have you gone to the Mandrake Shop?"

"What's that?"

"It's an occult bookstore, the owner might be able to

help you out with some of the Hindu stuff.”

It was late, too late to go to the Mandrake Shop. I had suffered a certain devolution in the last few days, from being someone who wouldn't read a pop occult book to someone that would be asking help from the local wizard.

There were no messages on my answering machine when I got home. I started to dial Marilyn, but decided that I couldn't say anything that would help the situation. I knew the next time I saw her I would tell her the truth, the whole truth. If she wanted to break up with me, she was more than justified. I guess I could still rest in my coffin.

The Mandrake Shop was small and warm. Books of all kinds filled its shelves, tables of crystals and ceremonial knives and strange jewellery abounded. A couple of people were talking to a portly gent behind the counter about the phases of the moon, for some reason. I looked through the shelves searching for *The Yellow Flower*. When the other customers let, I approached the counter.

I asked, “Do you have a copy of *The Yellow Flower*?”

The man shook his head slowly, mentally inventorying his stock, “No, sir, not a title I recognize.”

“It's by Lily Brockden.”

“I'm afraid that doesn't ring bells either.”

“It's about Maya.”

“The Amerindian people or the Sanskrit term?”

“The Sanskrit term.”

“Well, all books are about Maya to some extent. Especially fiction books. After all a popular translation of Maya would simply be *lie*.”

“So Maya is a bad thing.”

“Well, for most Hindu groups, yes, Maya is a bad thing. Others view it as mystery, magical power – the Persian word ‘magic’ comes from the same Indo-Iranian root verb, Ma – to measure, limit, or give form. You must remember that this is an amateur's opinion, I am not a Sanskritist. Some groups view Maya very positively. According to the Vira Shavists, it is another name for Shakti, the goddess of energy.”

“I don't get it, what do lies have to do with energy?”

“Well, certain lies. Shakti's name comes from ‘shak’ – ‘to be able.’ She's the goddess of believing in yourself. You know, you are about to do something you've never done before, and you tell yourself, ‘I know I can do that.’ Well, you're invoking Shakti. It's an illusion, of course, a lie. Just as telling yourself, ‘I know I'll screw up’ is a lie.”

“What does this have to do with a goddess?”

“Well, for most of us, that is to say most men, it's a woman that does this for us. Gives us power by telling lies, when they ask about our work, our lives. It's the oldest magic in the world. It's what we read love stories for.”

“What do the women get out of this?”

“Don't ask me. I just run a bookstore.”

Once again I felt like there was a conspiracy surrounding me. Everything this guy had said – he knew too much, maybe he stole the book. I started to run out of the store. I bought a package of sandalwood incense instead. I drove over to Marilyn's and knocked on her door, but she was either not home or not answering.

Sunday was pretty miserable. I called up Mom and had a long conversation about nothing. I could tell she wanted to get off the phone but I kept on for no reason. I tried to get Matthew interested in playing a game of Acquire, but he was in a grumpy stay-at-home mood. I watched TV and ate Spaghetti-Os out of the can with a spoon. I would have to tell Marilyn everything, not just that somehow the book disappeared, but that I had to have her, that she was my Energy. I would make everything right. I would love her like she should be loved. I would paint her, I would write verses for her. I had written verses for a high-school sweetheart, and I could do so again. I cleaned out the freezer.

I found the book.

It was beneath my ice trays.

I would tell her. I would tell her all. Tomorrow.

Monday was wonderful. I sang, I skipped through the hallways, I had the same grin that only hours of love-making can bring.

Matthew asked what I was so happy about.

I told him that I was going to make up with my girlfriend.

“Carol?” he asked.

“No, Carol was months ago. Marilyn, I've told you about her.”

He shrugged.

After work I drove over to her apartment.

The door was half-opened. I went in. The apartment was empty save for a cleaning lady running a vacuum. I tried to ask her where Marilyn was, but language proved a barrier.

I went to the manager's office. What they told me was a surprise, but like the surprising in dreams, somehow expected as well. No one had lived in that apartment for months.


I went outside and leaned against my car holding *The Yellow Flower*. Maybe I had just made her up. What proof did I have – a dingy used book that no one seemed to remember? Maybe she was just a lie, I told myself. A dream that I had after reading the book. Someone called my name. It sounded like Marilyn.

I turned.

There was no one there, but several dandelion seeds floated in the air on their gossamer sails. Up they went. Up. Up, and then they were gone.

(For Zulfikar Ghose)

Don Webb lives in Austin, Texas. He was the subject of an interview in *Interzone* 143, and the last three (of many) stories by him that we have published in these pages were “The Jest of Yig” (#143), “Turn-of-the-Century Real Life” (#148) and “The Prophecies at Newfane Asylum” (#153).



Nick Lowe

Nobody can say we weren't warned about the Warner Village of Erised. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest desires of our hearts... This mirror shows us neither knowledge nor truth. Men have gone mad looking into it. It does not do to dwell on dreams, Harry, and forget to live." Most of this is near-verbatim out of the book, but the finger-wagging final sentence is new in the film version. And you can certainly see the Professor's point, because watching the nation's favourite fantasy spring to life in such potent visible form is a distinctly uncomfortable peep into our collective soul.

However glad, weary, or both we may be of the Potter mythocracy, the sour, sad telchins who grumble that Jo Rowling's patchwork imagination is no more capable of an original idea than a sedated house-elf are mistaking the point for the eraser. Even in their dead-tree form, the Potter tales hold up a mirror to our deepest, darkest desires for old but not yet forgotten things forbidden to wish for openly: a class-ridden, privilege-dominated world of self-perpetuating meritocracies, secret networks of power, short-cuts to the adult world that bypass the dreary inconvenience of parents, and an escape route from the 21st century into a deeper, purer Britain that can somehow marry classical premodern production design with postmodern power cool without actually passing through the modern along the way. As has been often said over the years, the Potter

books were from the start quite penetrating on the state of the nation, probing the nostalgia for heritage narratives of boarding-school life and detection without concealing their dodgier underpinnings in colonial structures of power and privilege. What's more, they actually paint a troublingly accurate picture of the real governance of Britain, as a wainscot world of secretive and unaccountable wizards who all went to the same boarding schools and run the ministries and intelligence services.

So now that we can all gaze out of the darkness upon *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, it's more unsettling than ever to watch our desires take life. With script and cast held to a tight brief of reproducing the novel's highlights with maximum fidelity (which they all do uneventfully well, for the most part), the most significant element in the film version becomes the production design. This is mostly pretty phenomenal: stupendous locations, both real and knocked-up; great sets and costumes, and superb lighting design. But it's very striking when you see it all up on screen how completely the look is based on a pre-modern steam-train Britain. Diagon Alley is the one retail streetfront in the length and breadth of the land without a single Dixons or Boots; it's all small independent businesses flogging the niche products of traditional crafts by the light of oil lamps off tropical hardwood counters.

With perfect faithfulness, in fact, the screen translation becomes a vast diorama of heritage cinema that, like the books, simultaneously plays it straight and strong while also inviting quite provocative reflection on the state of the nation it serves. Five years ago, none of us could have imagined that a fantasy novel series would end up as the government's best hope to save the British economy from foot & mouth, international terrorism, and global recession. But such is JK's stranglehold on our cultural export market that the entire nation has woken up to find itself co-opted into one vast Harry Potter theme park, with tourist maps and package itineraries framed around the film locations. (The most optimistic bandwagon-leaper has to be Bracknell council's "Harry Potter Tour" of the housing estates of Martins Heron, which plays Privet Drive in the Dursley sequence.)

As a film of the book and all it's become, the Kloves script and Columbus film are pretty hard to fault on points; indeed, it's impressive to see how well the *Philosopher's Stone* works as a film with so little radical surgery. Admittedly it's the most easily filleted of the four Potters to date, with its long and fairly feeble setup half before the plot gets going allowing fairly painless deletion of most of the stuff nobody much cherishes. Yet even the weak lines and laboured jokes on the page (and there are plenty in *Stone*) play surprisingly well in the mouths of pre-

mier-league luvvies with a pacey director and editor behind them. Surprisingly, what remains by far the most professional, tight-paced, cinematic ending in the book series to date is the one thing seriously fumbled in the screen version, with the chess set piece bloating out the others, and the confrontation severely anticlimactic. I don't want to get sad-git about this, but in the book we *do* have magical ropes appear from the air and bind HP tight during the Blofeld scene with the unmasked baddy. Presumably they couldn't get a finished effect working in time for release, because in the film Hazza just stands on a step chatting with the villain without evincing any sense of urgency over anything like rushing forward to stop the evil Prof reincarnating Him Who Cannot Be Pronounced. Still, after two and half hours of creditable but quite sufficiently delighting running time, we should be grateful for such closure as we're allowed, since our lives are now mapped out for years to come – like new bugs at boarding school staring glumly at the soon-to-be-all-too-familiar faces looming over us. For the next three years the two mightiest powers in fantasy will be duking it out for that coveted Christmas number-one spot, and the cinema cycle will take on the rhythm we all know so well of a year-long wait for a big event showdown between Harry and the dark Lord. We may as well resign ourselves to enjoying it.

There's some surprisingly sharp discussion of the heritage business and its moral economics in the season's most inventive original, Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* – which shows how to prevent apocalypse, put the lid on the energy crisis, and stop weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of rogue states, all through the simple promotion of literacy and the return of cultural treasures. "Academics!" sneers the chief tomb raider. "You never want to get your hands dirty. If we gave back every artifact from a museum, we'd be left with an empty building. We're just performing a necessary service to the archaeological community." And so our team of multi-ethnic animated oddballs find themselves ransacking the secret history of the world for lost new-age power sources, which our evil mercenary captain ("I prefer the term 'adventure capitalist'") sees merely as a commodity to trade to the Kaiser.



Daniel Radcliffe as Harry Potter

Happily, in an ending celebratory of a peculiarly US version of colonial symbiotics, by opening their doors to limited commerce with the west the Atlanteans get to keep their native culture and treasures, *but* acquire a modern information culture and decent transportation system.

Atlantis is a film for the post-*Mulan* audience which sets out, with inspirational perversity, not to do all the annoying things that Disney has made its name from doing: songs, talking

animals, obviously merchandisable products, or anything much at all for the under-fives, preferring instead to fizz with really good ideas in a way that one doesn't normally associate with Disney. *Atlantis* has the quite brilliant, if perilously uncommercial, inspiration of filtering Plato through a turn-of-the-century magazine fantasy genrefest, marrying a Rider Haggard scenario with Vernean technology in a thrillingly primeval kind of pre-mo ERB. It's astonishingly effective stuff. Despite some rather unattractive square-edged character design in the topside cast, the hookup between geeky-glassed cryptoarchaeologist and 8,800-year-old princess bursting out of her bikini is as viscerally irresistible as it must have been in the ancient Numenorean movie theatres where this storyline first saw the light of darkness. And it's all helped along by a tight script, daft plot, witty anachronisms, jokes that are equally juvenile to all ages ("I got your four basic food groups," grunts the old-frontiersman cook: "beans, bacon, whisky, and lard"), and the world's best-ever daft explanation for How Come They Speak English ("must be some kind of a root language... it's like the Tower of Babel"). There's even a kind of new-age potted history of cinema itself: "The crystal thrives on the emotions of all that came before us. In return, it promotes longevity. Over time, it developed a consciousness of its own." Yes, well, I think we've all been here before.



Nicole Kidman in *The Others*

If *Atlantis* has proved less buoyant than it deserves, Alejandro Amenabar's remarkably profitable *The Others* survives several simultaneous forms of what are normally thought of as movie suicide: Hollywood money in a Chilean auteur job, scored by himself and shot in Spain pretending to be Jersey, with an entirely unAmerican cast which includes the artfilm debut of Eric Sykes, and allowing Nicole Kidman an acting knob that goes all the way up to a hundred and eleven in what's essentially one of those Catholic rants how much it's messed up the director's head to have spent his childhood having all those scary lies told him. *The Others*, of course, is one of those films that pivots entirely around a "twist ending," which is a bit unfortunate as the moment you know it has a twist at the end it's obvious from literally the opening seconds

what that twist has to be, and the only hook is wondering how assorted oddities along the way will be reconciled with what by now is the least surprising surprise in the grammar of the genre. The resolution is queasier than it perhaps intends, with its strange conclusion that Catholic eschatology is all a pack of evil lies but you can still be happy with your loved ones for all eternity if you just murder them in their beds and then blow your own head off. But if you can take this – and Kidman's star performance, for which the term overwrought is just too bloodless and weedy – it does have a couple of moments that made the audience at my showing scream out loud, a sound you don't realize you've never heard till you hear it.

But if what you fancy is a European scary artmovie about motherhood gone mad, you're better off with Jan Svankmajer's *Little Otik* – in which an unhinged childless mum re-enacts the Czech fairytale of the couple who adopt a bit of wood in place of a baby, only for it to grow into an all-devouring monster that gobbles up the neighbourhood. Tighter and less freewheeling than most of his work, with the stop-motion savagery confined to inserts, it's nevertheless set squarely in Svankmajer country: a dilapidated apartment-block world of extreme oral closeups,



Mrs. Horakova (Veronika Zilkova) cuts Little Otik's fingernails in *Little Otik*

uncomfortably frontal camera angles, and the world's most consistently disgusting food photography. It's a world, as usual, in which inanimate things are constantly on the verge of coming to squirming life on your plate or TV. ("Steaks covered in Flora flour are the

best!" barks one of a series of increasingly-bizarre adverts for domestic products, as a steak rolls around twitching in its coating. "It MUST be Flora. All the rest are full of worms!") This being a Channel Four international co-prod, K. J. Erben's telling of the story is helpfully narrated for the incomprehending western audience in brilliantly evil-looking picture-book cutouts, and there's even a momentary glimpse of a little bit of CG animation, though put to a use I don't expect to see in Hollywood any time soon. The move into increased live action has freed up Svankmajer's running time from the tyranny of by-the-minute animation costs, not entirely to the advantage of the final film – which at two hours ten is much too long for what's essentially a feature-length short, much of it replaying obsessions more economically treated in the much earlier *Down to the Cellar*. But it flags less than that rather unfortunate centaur scene at precisely the point of lowest energy in *Harry*, and its attempt at grimness is rather undercut by the liberal onscreen consumption of numerous brands of what in our wizard isles are top posh imported bottle beers. God bless JKR (or is it the Queen Mum? it gets harder each day to tell them apart) – but I know which tour bus I'm taking.

Nick Lowe

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THE EATER



Andy Robertson

*...I waked there into the dark,
in the future of this world.*

*And the sun had died...
- William Hope Hodgson
The Night Land*

Eight miles above the Land, Khruaten looks out into the night through one of the Eyes of the Tower.

The oval screen before her shows a low hill in the middle of a barren plain. The scale bars indicate that it is about two furlongs in height and two miles wide. Set atop it is a knotted complex of rock strands, from which a twisting, iridescent stream of many-coloured radiance fountains upward into the everlasting darkness. Glints of vulcanism drain away to the right, but beyond it and to the left there is no light at all and the enhancement routines of the Eye have sketched the naked surface of the Land in symbolic no-colour contours as a random jumble of basalt tesserae in low relief.

There is no vegetation nearby, no physical structures of any sort, and no visible movement of beasts or giants. The lesser entities of the Land do not come near. In the ancient records this many-hued blur, dancing in the eternal night 60 leagues to the south-west of the Redoubt, is named The Rainbow That Dies.

Once more she applies herself. Quietening her breath. Humbling, stilling, and opening her mind. The continual fear is under control, nothing is reaching at her mind from out of the Land, and all thoughts of success or failure, of gaining acceptance in her guild, have been banished to irrelevance. She strives only to be part of the machine that scans the night.

Something touches her, inside her eyes.

She cannot sense into the upper dark, but the lower levels are truly open, and the screen becomes clear, detailed, reflecting her mind. The more subtle sight interfaces with the electronics as easily as it does with the organic nerves, delivering information that the computers of the Tower may glut themselves on or a mindblind co-observer may share if only instrument and operator are in harmony. It is an ancient trick of the Monstruwacans.

The images of six black tubes appear on the screen, drawn from her mind to overlay the barren dark. Their roots are spaced symmetrically about the gush of the Rainbow, and they flow upward, swaying, to open in monstrous flowers of night that fray upwards into nothing. Complex structures writhe within them. Peristaltic narrowings pump plasma skeins up and away from the Land, up to the region where the eyes of her soul refuse to construct more lies to overlay the glass and silicon grid before her with a thousand different shades of black.

Each dark Flower is about a mile in height, and above the 200-fathom level the stalks show some of the typical dendritic character of the pneumavores, branching and rebranching into hard black points. Some of these points wave free, searching. Others are buried avidly in the central bright stream.

All is stable, and the Eye screen is delivering data at an optimum rate for the machines, but the human Monstruwacans who stand around her also require to know what is passing in the mind of their seer. Khresten begins her verbal subjective log.

"Six shapes, like flowers, grow from the Land. Each is... thrice the height of the Rainbow."

Are they rooted? Of long residence?

"An air of permanence surrounds them. A year at least. Yet they are not fixed – they are cyclic – they are growing – they waver and change."

Are they Eaters?

"... not of us. Of the Rainbow. That is why it is dying. Now they wait..."

What do they wait for?

"... for something from above, Senior. They are waiting..."

... to welcome it, she realizes suddenly and says. That is a knowledge that could never be relayed through the screen, but to her it is obvious, immanent.

Once more she feels the insect-touch on her retinae, and though she knows the danger she opens herself further. *They are not conscious of me.*

The screen is suddenly full of detail. The entities of the night come into a sharper focus. Each stalk is a braided, forking, writhing, column of darkness. Tiny motes of unlight stream up and down, pulsing irregular blobs carrying what might be dissolved shreds of their prey, checking and stumbling as they collide with each other. The Flowers are milking the Rainbow, building and strengthening themselves from its flesh, which they suck in and consume through pores that open and close on the tips of the dark branches. They are Eating it. It writhes from one side to the other, from one scourge to another, pierced, trapped, hooked, bled, and its essence diffuses away into the thorned webs of darkness. It is slowly growing weaker and smaller, though it seems still to try to fight its way upwards as its tormentors continue to grow larger and more extended.

The interface between the distant entities absorbs Khresten's attention entirely, and a sense of the most awful pain, of the diminishment of that far bright being, overwhelms her. Her mind opens yet further. Despite all warnings and despite all her discipline she begins to lose touch with her own body as her centre shifts towards the radiant agony, and she feels herself flowing out into the Night on a slow tide of nausea.

The gluttoned Flowers become clearly visible as pulsing fractals of black on black, their faces now tilting inward to form a cup, a web, a tangle or nest. They are connecting to each other, fusing together into a complex of threads that moves and links and breaks, not fully symmetrical, but somehow... wet.

And something new is beginning. The Flowers are not alone.

Something is descending out of the night. Threads of sentience fall from the upper dark, and here and there they touch the Land and dissolve to nothing, each returning a racing pulse of information which, in her heightened state, she feels as if it flees along her own nerves. She cannot sense them until they flash: she cannot follow them back to their source: she knows them only by their echo, by the hollow in the night they leave as they vanish.

The threads fall around her and on her, each bringing a spark of unknowable otherness, and her soul reports each touch.

Again. And again.

Gripping, gripping as hard as she can, she is slipping from her points of anchorage. The Tower is tiny and distant, a complex clutter far behind her atop the vast pyramid of shielded life that is the Redoubt. She has gone too far, been too trusting, made foolish errors lethal for a seer, and her immaterial spirit is losing its connection with her flesh and drifting helplessly, out into the Night Land.

A deep cold surrounds her, a physical sensation like freezing currents of wind, overlaid by the knowledge of ravenous things awaking and approaching.

I am lost.

But her body, tiny and far from her as a distant doll, still obeys her. With the faraway puppet-eyes of her flesh she can see that the Rainbow is now totally confined, nearly consumed, a smear of light with a thin pulse of despair echoing out from it. She babbles something as

she closes her eyes, closes her mind, and releases the gesture of Guard, brushing against the light beams which interthread her fingers for this very purpose. Instantly the ravening electronic shields of the Tower flash into being round her. The room roars as the primary V-pulse fills the walls, the cybernetic memories are blanked with ruthless overriding authority, the screen glares white, then true black, and she falls back trembling in the chair as her returning soul snaps into union with her body.

Not too late. And from the eyes of the grave men and women who surround her, from their voices and hands, from their mind-touch, their spieking, she knows of nothing but affirmation, love and support.

The recovery, the interrogation, the report, are over. With her chaperone, apprentice Khresten descends towards the Redoubt and her home city within it. But she is still pale and shaken, still unstrung, her knees as melting wax, and the older woman must half support her as they ride down the central well of the Tower.

When they are alone and there is no risk of indignity Khresten huddles against her companion. *Let us go down quickly, quickly*, she does not say. She blanks her mind, and thinks of home and her younger sisters, while the tall old woman whispers to her and reminds her to be brave.

They fall 200 fathoms, past level after level of active and passive observation systems – radar, optical, sonar, mindset – past datastores, libraries and power nodes, administrative clusters and support systems. Most of the levels are temporarily shut up and dead. Some are sealed and Forbidden. Others are in use, brightly lit, filled with tangles of enigmatic equipment and moving figures. Day and night, the Monstruwacans interrogate the Land.

They reach the Tower's foundation. Below this is the truncated roof of the pyramidal Redoubt proper, three fathoms thick of imperishable metal, quick with subtle fires. But the Tower and the Redoubt are sealed from each other, and they must descend on their own feet, breathing with the aid of air-bells, past the final blanks that insulate the Tower and deny any infection entry to the Redoubt. No dangerous path is permitted. No communications link, no optical fibre, no microwave beam, no quantum pair, may connect the last refuge of humanity with the observatory of the Monstruwacans that looks outward on the Land. Only human beings and written records ever make the passage.

They descend, wading the horizontal Air Clog. They give up the Word. They enter into the safety and the peace.

A day has passed, a night has begun. Far below the Tower, safe at home, in her city, in her house, in her bed, Khresten dreams.

Sleep-time in the Four-Hundredth and Third city breathes round her. Her two younger sisters sigh quietly, sleeping, a fathom or so away from her in the same room where she lies. Their minds brighten and dim in a slow rhythm, moving between REM dream and profound theta passivity. In the next chamber the minds of her mother and father are dim red coals radiating a quiet animal warmth. There is a whisper of fluttering fabric strips in the venti-

lator. A gentle radiance flickers over the walls, too soft to awaken the inhabitants, for in this age no one ever utterly darkens a room or sleeps alone unless they must.

Khresten dreams that she wakes, that she dresses and walks out of the room. Obedient to an impulse she refuses to acknowledge, she leaves her house and makes her way to the public viewing galleries – never empty at any time. She enters and takes a seat well separated from the others, as is her custom.

Before them, with dream-logic, is her screen from the Tower, now somehow grown to the typical dimensions of a viewing gallery. But all is safe now. The monstrous threats of the Land that press inward upon her with a thousand attentions every instant that she is at her duty are absent from this place. She thinks. *We have disarmed them: we can study them in peace.*

Her screen is once more showing the Flowers tormenting the Rainbow. She strokes the machinery with her mind and tries to interface with it, but there is no engagement. And she understands that all that is past. The Flowers are now just one more of the shows – she thinks with faint scorn – the shows, the bogeys, the harmless pictures from the Land that can be used to entertain the half-blind, half-deaf other people of the Redoubt.

In the audience that surrounds her stupid pity replaces stupid fear as the Flowers consume their prey. The Rainbow is so clearly in agony, so clearly having its very substance sucked away. Unconscious of their own emotional radiations and yet affected by them, the viewers stir helplessly, and one woman, perhaps an undetected and untrained partial Sensitive, has the bad taste to telepathically spiek her feelings in uncontrolled verbalized form. With practised patience, Khresten guards her scorn, but behind her she feels another consciousness flick in sympathy with hers... as now once more the expected climax arrives. The Rainbow withers, fades, and dies, reducing to a blurred nub of mist. The Flowers join together into a single organism, a single intermeshed cup, opening upward.

In silence the other patrons leave. All except that one behind her.

But she is distracted by the screen. The slow fall out of the Night is beginning, and now she will be able to study it safely beyond the point where she was forced to retreat. The shapes stir in the blackness and then become tense and still. She tries to watch, but the threads falling from the upper dark are scarcely visible. It is hopelessly frustrating: there is no contact, no feedback, no *touch*. And she finds herself straining toward the screen and trying to affect it. She can see so little but still she can tell that the threads are falling closer and closer to the Flowers. Something is happening.

And now one thread finds, touches, fuses, with the Flowers and this thread does not break, but connects avidly, thickens, plumps... her hands fall into her lap and her palms press into her flesh as the Flowers and the Thread fuse with astonishing violent rapidity into a single thing; a round solid-seeming mass, fat and satiated, settling in on itself, straddling the shreds of the Rainbow that yet remain.

A shock passes through her. Her breastbone quivers. She awakes.

As she does it comes to her again that there was someone near her in the gallery, regarding her and understanding her.

Another Sensitive? Khresten thinks. Then the dream recedes. Half-sleeping, she comes to the understanding that it was only a dream, that she is safe in her bed. And it was folly of course: it would be Forbidden to duplicate the more subtle and dangerous achievements of the Tower down here. To prevent the creation of a path the galleries of the Redoubt may amplify only visible light... She lies awake for a short time, then sighs, and thinks of other things, and passes to other and unremembered dreams.

Another day. There is no work for her to do in the times set aside for her recovery. But of course there are the children to care for and to teach.

Watch, little sisters. This is how it is done. She bares her arms and throat, and very carefully and exactly dabs a spot of doped nectar on each pulse point. Then she recaps the vials and sits completely still while the heat of her flesh sends pheromones and molecules of glucose adrift through the room.

Magically, jhenna and jhenni drift out of their open cage door, circle and flutter, and settle to feed, perched on her parallel upturned wrists. Her two sisters laugh with delight as their pet butterflies flirt their wings, showing comical eye-spots like perpetually amazed and outraged faces.

Hush, hush, don't frighten them. There is one drop on the hot artery at the base of each thumb, and she has judged the quantities there exactly right, because the two insects take wing again at almost the same time. They flit round her and then resettle on the smaller traces she has left inside each of her elbows, in the hollow next to the big sinew: a sourer blend of fructose and a little vinegar with a different chemical messenger blended in. Again they sip, and again, almost together, they fly away. Perfect.

She sits even more absolutely still now, chin high, smiling. Even her hair must not move, for the third smear is in the tender groove to each side of her larynx, half-brushed by its fall. But only jhenna wants this: her wings tickle Khresten's throat, while mischievous jhenni flies away to investigate the room.

The little girls chase him. *Don't grab, don't grab.* Mnemmne the elder catches jhenni at last, persuading him to perch on her own much-daubed hand.

"Make him spread his wings again, Khresten. What is he thinking?"

I cannot do that with just my mind. Give him something sweet, sweetheart. Look, how he loves you.

"Why did you send the gold butterflies back to that man? They were lovely, I would have liked to play with them too."

You will understand that when you are older, little sister.

The younger sister waits frustrated, beginning to be angry, so Khresten gives jhenna over to her and sits down quietly. The two little girls coo over feeding their pets for a while and get distracted, as usual. Then they

let the butterflies free and huddle up on her lap, two sticky little messes of syrup, squashing her, to the further ruin of her thin housegown.

Three more days left. Then she must return to her duty, in the heights above.

"I dreamt of it. Of the Rainbow and the Flowers. That may affect my perception, Senior"

Not when you are linked to the machines. Are you afraid?

"Yes, I am afraid."

Good. You have had seven days' rest. Are you ready?

"Yes, Senior."

The Rainbow chokes and dies, again and again. The Flowers Eat it. Why? What comes from above?

"What is the Rainbow, Senior?"

Perhaps one of the allies. It survives cycle after cycle of this. But most likely, another unknown.

Begin now, apprentice.

Khresten bows her head, binds the sensors in position, and carefully takes the required conformations with her hands. Each member of the team checks off in turn. All is ready.

Once more she fuses with the Eye and looks out. Below her the Air Clog, the force field that is the first layer of defence, bells out from the foot of the Tower down to its anchorage in the radiant circle which surrounds the Redoubt at ground level, miles below. The minds of the Watchers strike against it like furlong-thick bars of metal, but she slips between those bars and turns her regard outward. Though neither her body nor her soul change position her focus of attention flits swiftly, carried by the machine, away from the ancient knot of forces centred on the Redoubt, past and over the South-West Watcher, past the Road, over leagues and leagues of blackness, to where the Rainbow writhes and flickers.

The Flowers are present again, but they are tiny. A cool mindpressure from the log-monitoring cyberneticist informs her *changed position* and she sees at once that these are successor entities. They are growing in slightly different positions, more widely spaced and shifted slightly clockwise, though still symmetrically surrounding the Rainbow. And these Flowers are not yet flowers but only unbranched stalks, writhing slowly as they grow, stretching upward for a minute and then shrinking in a slow rhythm. It is early in the cycle. The Rainbow is hardly affected. It still flows smoothly upward.

She watches for two hours while the Flowers continue to grow very slowly. At the end of this period she requests a rest, and the team pause to discuss what they have been seeing. They agree to wait five hours and then resume. They have now recorded the cycle in detail at two points, and the important thing, they concur, is to see what follows the growth of the Flowers to their maximum size and their fusion into a single entity.

When Khresten returns to her duty the Flowers are just opening. They bob and dip grotesquely, each black mouth in turn plunging into the flesh of the Rainbow and absorbing a quantum of its being. A different technique of feeding, which Khresten notes and describes... *how*

quickly I become used to this. This session is shorter. On a simple extrapolation it will be at least twelve hours before the Flowers reach their full height again. Since there is no point in taking the risk of continuous mental observation, two of the other apprentices monitor the Rainbow using only visible light, while the shields go up on low power and Khresten rests.

They call her back when the Rainbow is again guttering down towards extinction. She bows, embraces the metal, and forms for them again a picture of the avid barbed networks consuming the stream of light. But this time she is more careful. Practised, prudent, she refuses to be lured forth, but watches safely as the Rainbow dies and the flowers fuse once more into a single mesh.

The tangled Flowers become absolutely still and tense, waiting. Now the fall of the threads from above begins. Confined within the Tower, she is only just able to detect them but she successfully resists the dangerous urge to see more. The half-seen threads fall closer and closer to the Rainbow, unseeable till they make contact with the surface of the Land, apparently blind, groping, searching, scattering at random without system or logic, until at last, and not perceived until it has already happened, one has touched the Flowers.

Something like a dark lightening bolt slides down it. The Flowers quiver, seemingly in shock, and fall together into a single globe. She startles.

Once more the shields cut in and the cybernetics zeroes all data. She apologizes to her team, but what she knows she cannot tell them. *It startled me because I dreamt it. I dreamt this happening.*

But surely not.

No, it was not exactly the same.

To reset the shields with a proper delicacy will take almost an hour. As the apprentices go about it she relaxes, falls back in the chair – and becomes aware that someone was looking at her, looking *at* her. She unthinkingly jumps to correct her immodest posture, then stops and casts her eyes and her mind about the room in great anger. *Who?* But it was not the Senior, not any one of the grave older men. And it was not any one of the other young apprentices, who are utterly absorbed in the matters of technos. Her flowering rage that Eve-teasing should interfere here, of all places, falls away as she sees that there is no one who it could have been, no one at all.

She was mistaken.

This is really my home, she thinks. Absurd. But here... no polite, suitable young men trying to please, while their parents talk formally in the next room. No little poems about the beauty of instep or wrist. No strangers glancing at her, unconscious that their under-minds are rehearsing a rape. No passers-by reimagining her into a stupid naked popsy and tucking her away to dance behind their eyelids while they milk themselves in the night.

I will never marry. This is the better life.

But such thoughts belong to the Redoubt, not the Tower.

She directs the Eye towards the face of the South-West Watcher and contemplates It, as calmly as possible, not fighting fear, for 20 minutes. It is a much-practised penance or exercise though not one usually carried out

through such an amplifier. Her co-workers understand and allow their minds to subtly support hers, without questioning her reasons, until she is satisfied that the gaze of the Monster has burned all the littleness out of her.

Calm again, she confronts the Night.

Her focus of attention moves out from the Tower to where the lingering ghost of the Rainbow swirls and then halts, aghast, at the monstrous globe of darkness that now squats above the remaining shred of light. It has grown beyond all proportion. It is rooted on the six stalks that were the Flowers, their tips spreading like trees or veins to form multiple points of attachment or support. Its surface seems hard, rigid, almost opaque, utterly beyond any penetration by her. It does not move.

Something is inside it. There is the merest hint of stirring life.

She watches for two hours more but nothing seems to happen.

At last she retires.

The cycle, they agree, is not finished. From the stalks to the Flowers, from the Flowers to the tangled cup, and from that, fusing with some influence from the depths of night, to the globe, nearly a mile wide, multi-rooted, hovering above the Land. If the Rainbow follows the cycle as it has done for seven years it will pour forth again in full power in less than three days more. In the intervening period, therefore, something must happen to the globe.

She is exhausted. It is agreed she will descend to her home and rest for one full day. After that, they hope to witness the final mutation.

Coming home earlier than she had expected, safe again within the gates of her own City, Khresten dismisses her chaperone and walks abroad through the streets. She always dresses as anonymously as possible, affects the veil in public as many women do, and once she has taken off the shoes which one wears only for journeys outcity there is nothing to mark her. Few ever recognize her as a Sensitive and one of the apprentice Monstruwacans.

Busy people move to and fro. The buzzing hive of life surrounds her, and the pad of a million bare feet. Though she was warned years ago that the teaching and the exercises of the Tower would continue to increase her sensitivity beyond bearing, she is shocked again by the *noise*. The uncontrolled mental radiations of the inhabitants overwhelm her, and though she screws her mind as tightly shut as possible she cannot go on. Regretfully she modifies her path and avoids the most crowded public areas. *Ten days ago my soul was naked in the Land. And can I not endure the Agora of my own home city?* Apparently, she cannot.

That night she dreams again. She walks though the quiet night-time streets visiting the scenes of her youth: the school, the places where she would meet her playmates, the library, the playgrounds. All those friends are separated from her now, all gone their separate ways and some married already. She walks slowly. Alone she wanders down the long corridors past the statues, past the

open public gardens and malls. A cool scented breeze blows from the vents. It is jasmineday.

A few other people are abroad and now she must follow them back to the viewing gallery. The Flowers are there. But she has seen this already.

She speaks to her waiting friend.

It is an old story. Really, these shows are for fools... I come here because I am one of those who looks out on the Land and discovers these things, I suppose. No, these are not bad people. Very few of them are weak or cruel. But they are so blind, so stupid.

You are a stranger here? On your wanderjahr? I do not need to see this again. I will return home now, but I will show you what I can of the city, on the way. That is right, to a stranger. You will only have a short time here.

Let us leave the gallery. No, you must not walk beside me! You, a man and a stranger here! Walk to one side and a little behind me, at a proper distance.

So. Here is the Four-Hundredth and Third city. What would you see?

Every House shows a different face. And they are all different behind their masks as well. Most are tens of thousands of years old, and each holds a clan of many families and a hundred old stories. They are private to their owners. I have visited only a few Houses, the Houses of my friends, and they were very different from my own home and from each other.

In that one lives the magistrate: it is not especially marked out, for the position is not hereditary. He is the magistrate for this year only, they are not well pleased with him.

Our lamps are very beautiful, are they not? We can do a thousand things with light. Harsh light, soft light, warm or cold light, calming or enraging, loving or hating. Our Lampmakers make them, and they are famous for it. Of course their best work illuminates this or that great and important public place, not in the open street. We send some of our best lamps to the other cities.

There is little machinery here in the lower cities: no fires, no furnaces, nothing loud or hot. How would we breath? Our own body heat is enough to strain the lungs of the Redoubt. We make few things, so we must make them to last 10,000 years.

Look at this tile beneath my foot. The glyph marks the spot of a murder 200 years past. That is a most notable memorial, but you can see that each stone once carried a message, though most of them are worn to nothing. Every stone and every wallplate in this city has a story written on it, they say. The ones that are blank are simply those that have been cleaned by time.

And see how many fountains we have in the streets? And the trees? Come past here. When I was very young, this one, here, was the darling-tree of my girl-band. Tllel-lalu is his name. We watered him, tallied his leaves, cleaned him of rust or blackrot, celebrated the first flower that blossomed each year. I see the younger bands are taking good care of him. Goodbye, Tllel-lalu.

The great pillars support the core of the upper Cities: no doubt you have the same in your own home. Half the lower pyramid is solid metal by volume, they tell us.

The Library. I spent so much time here when I was young. Dreaming. How I wanted to be a hero, and explore the Land. Half the young people do, I suppose. I read story after story. All that is a fantasy, of course, as you come to understand when you grow up: only the insane go. And anyway it is Forbidden for women. But I had the Night-hearing – strongly enough to be trained – and that decided my future.

So now I explore the Land in a different way. I have been a seer for the Monstruwacans for two years. No one remains a seer for very long because the strain is so great. In two more years my time will be over and I will have a choice, to stay with the guild, or return here to join another guild, or marry, or do some other thing. But if they will have me, I shall stay with the Monstruwacans, and that shall be my life.

This is a duello ground. It is deserted now, but even so it is not polite for us to linger here and gawp.

Here is my home. Our whole clan lives here in the separate houses, all within the wall. My mother and father and my sisters: that is our family. And my parents' male cousins and their wives, and the elders of the previous generation.

I will not be living with my parents much longer, I think. I will live in a separate house, but still within our House.

Goodbye, then.

Khresten wakes sleepy and lazy. For once she feels properly rested and happy. She hums as she stretches, and catches the eyes of her youngest sister as that one tiptoes out of the room.

The girl has been told many times by everyone, *Let your sister rest, and told, Do not be noisy while Khresten sleeps in the morning*, and now she makes a face of exaggerated virtue and patience, mincing out with her finger to her lips and her hips wigwagging. Obviously someone needs to be taught a lesson.

Khresten leaps on her intending to provide instruction, but is fatally surprised when Mnemmne attacks her from behind: the three of them roll over and over in a tangle. Panting, laughing, she pins both of them down at last and tickles them very soundly while they scream and laugh and struggle.

Wai! Wai! She threatens them. *I am a monster from the Land! I am going to eat you!*



The day of rest is past. The great lift bears Khresten upwards again through the miles, and the armour of her resolve closes round her like a nightsuit. This time, she thinks, they will gain the full understanding. She will pluck it from the Night. She will not flinch whatever happens. She is no longer a girl, she is one of the elite of the

Redoubt, one of the few for whom the energy needed for such rapid travel can be carelessly and routinely expended, and she will not be a coward.

They rise past city after city, up through the last arcology of man, up through the storied and decorated labyrinths, to the steady beat of gongs. Messengers and notables, scientists and governors join and leave the lift, and as the great pyramid narrows towards its top and the Tower that stands there more and more of them are Monstruwacans, recognizing her and greeting her silently. It is wine to her spirit. Her chaperone stands behind her and is forgotten.

She remembers when she was new to this task. She used to weep with fear when she went up to her duty. Now the fear still comes, but it is a fear that thrills her even when it loosens her bowels and makes her limbs tremble and her heart pound.

Another day of half-life is over. Soon she will look on the Land again.

The globe is still there. Nothing has changed.

The length of the cycle the Rainbow undergoes has been consistent, plus or minus four percent, for the last seven years. Before the start of the present set of phenomena there was a long, long, period of stability when its stream flowed uninterrupted. There are near-legends of previous mutation, reaching 160,000 years back or more, behind the horizon of record, but these are becoming difficult to understand and interpret because of the creeping historical changes in language and writing that even the customs of the Redoubt cannot quite freeze into stasis. The last explorer to reach that region and return died 10,000 years ago and had little to say of the Rainbow except to hint that it was not malignant. The only sure legacy from the distant past is the name.

Some time in the next 14 hours the cycle will be complete.

It is a long period of continuous duty for any observer, but a pause in the survey cannot be tolerated at this point. The Senior and one of the other Monstruwacans spell Khresten at the Eye, one hour each, turn and turn about. The older men's time as seers is long past and their sensitivity has deliberately been trained down so they can endure months of Watch but they can monitor major events like this well enough.

Hours pass. At last the call to her comes. A change is imminent. As the Senior rises and gestures her to take the chair he hesitates: he will co-observe using a secondary link to the Eye and either of them will instantly cut the contact if they see fit. *Take very great care.*

The mind-presence of the Senior guards her back, gazes over her shoulder, like an armoured man standing there, but the essential vision is still hers. The picture on the screen comes into the clear focus only a trained seer's mind can provide. She sees that superficially the globe is still the same. But there is a sense of increasing tension, of *thinning*. There are movements within it, refinements of essence. It is coming to a cumulation of development, moving from one cusp of stability to another, and some unbearable climax is approaching. Part of her tries and tries to see more clearly, and part of her simply endures

the constant strain. Slowly, slowly, it changes.

Now the dark sphere seems to swell minutely, a datum sensed telepathically and translated by her brain as an intolerable visceral pressure, a sense of suffocation and confinement. And now, a pause. More minutes pass while she continues to watch. She does not think of herself at all, she tries to be as much as possible a part of the machine, but the tension grows and grows until the transferred sensations rack her to the point of actual pain.

And now the waiting is over. Intolerably complex forces shift and move. Rigidly controlled panic invades her and she denies to herself that there is any change, but the changes happen and continue to happen and now something inside her shrivels and shrinks away as the black sac of night is visibly and enormously deformed from within. Something is moving, something is about to break free. The vast thing changes with frightening speed and something is... Oh, so obviously *it is being born*. She cannot watch it and yet she will not retreat, she is reduced to a stone trodden underfoot, the fulcrum of intolerable forces, as the carnivorous Thing emerges, pauses, and vaults clear of the Land, expanding malignantly, filling the Night with a web of sentience.

She cannot coexist with it. Her heart still beats and the mechanisms of her mind and spirit still report but there is an instant when she is *not*. An Eater, one of the great forces of the Night, has been born and has gone out into the seas of darkness.

It flashes away and vanishes. Almost at once the Rainbow flows again.

Khresten makes her report.

Observation is suspended while the climactic events are analyzed. The Master is there, all the most Senior of the Monstruwacans, where Khresten and her team must come and testify in the high shielded chambers of the Tower. They question her endlessly, repeatedly, study the logs, talk and debate, on and on. They question her, most particularly. The mechanical recordings are open to all, but she was the one who received the faint noisings of Other intelligence that might be interpreted as intention, desire, planning, threat, if such words have any meaning at all when applied to the Eaters. Some fractional essence filtered through to her, and now she tries to express it in words, in mind-pictures, thoughts, movements, not trying to understand but simply to pass on what came from the Land. They watch her and listen to her and hier her with absolute attention.

The consensus, after days of meetings, is that the recent mutations of the Rainbow are probably no threat to the Redoubt. To the watchers of the Land something new must always mean something terrible, but it seems, it seems, that whatever is being birthed in the agonies of that distant fountain of light will at least ignore humanity. That is cause for celebration. Also there is a hint that they have learned something vital and new about the reproductive cycle of the Eaters, or at least of one clade of them. But seers are deliberately kept ignorant of these things to avoid giving them preconceptions of what they might sense in the Land, and Khresten is

only allowed to know that perhaps there has been some increment of knowledge, some tiny real gain.

Despite her enforced exclusion from the innermost circle of knowledge there is subtle, measured, profound praise for her. It does not make her proud or joyful but as she listens to it she knows, at last, that her future is fixed. Not because they have started to ask her questions with a real need to hear her answers and her opinions; not because they defer to her in tiny measure; not because she has finally been told, Yes, a place has been readied for her, she will be welcomed with ceremony and honour; but because she now understands and shares what makes them Monstruwacans.

That Thing, rejoicing in the night. That thing and its myriad peers, who are the true children of the universe. The coming eternities of Darkness belong to them, not to humanity. Light and life only had a brief place during the first beginnings of the cosmos, and the great Redoubt with all its millions is only a memory of those days, something that will soon be forgotten, a transient, fragile hive of dust and insects.

The lash has been laid upon her soul. The scar marks her as a Watcher of Monsters for all her life, married to the Night. When she looks at her peers without speaking to them or touching minds with them she sees the same knowledge in their eyes.

She returns home again. Now she walks the busy streets unafraid. The chatter and shouts of undisciplined minds are just noise: the covert or unconscious looks of lust are as meaningless and automatic as the attraction of the lodestone for a grain of iron. *Of what was I afraid?* she thinks. And she thinks, *soon I must leave home, leave and live alone.*

But there are problems, when she tells. Her mother argues and argues and then, amazingly, weeps and bawls. Then her sisters start. Khresten submits with a distant patience. She is soon to be of age: there is nothing improper about the move: she will still be within the larger House, the linked series of dwellings where her extended family have dwelt for millennia.

But of course the argument is not about where she will live but about the shape that her future life has now irrevocably taken, as they sense with sure instinct. *It has been decided. It happened to me: I did not do it*, she thinks. She refrains from trying to make them understand their own true motives. She is quiet, biddable, patient. She is as kind to them as she possibly can be. The ghosts of childish anger and annoyance stir within her and fall to dust.

Sleep-time comes, still called by custom the night. The argument is still bitter and theoretically unresolved, but they go to their room and prepare for bed. And now the girls huddle and whisper, and now little Mnemmne comes forward, with jhenna and jhenni perched on her wrists. Earnest, and serious, grown-up. This is her final effort.

"See how they love us. You have the Night-hearing, you know they love you. Stay with us, please, Khresten. Don't go away to the Tower forever."

Oh Mnemmne, it is not like that. I have to go. And yes,

I have the Night-hearing, but the butterflies do not love. We imagine they do, because they have grown eyes on their wings that look like funny faces, but they have no minds. There is nothing there: nothing at all. It is all just something we make up.

"You are lying," says Mnemmne, and hits her, no gentle blow. "I hate you."

It does not matter. Khresten is unmoved. She feels as though she could never be deeply moved or grieved by anything in the Redoubt again. She waits while they talk and they cry and they talk and they cry, and at last it ends. She kisses them both. *No, no; do not talk more. Sleep. This will pass.* Tear-stained, they sleep.

She sleeps, too. Then half-wakes, then sleeps again. The night seems endless. The vents flutter. The gentle moving waves of light on the wall counterfeits the Rainbow: the darker shapes of the furniture seem to writhe. She experiences the ghost or echo of the night-fears she knew as a child, and half-thinking compares it with amusement to the real Fear that visits her as she looks on the Land. But it is bad practice to do that. Half the fight is to stop your mind running away, and even a small indulgence may have to be paid for a hundred times over.

She resettles her thoughts by tallying the night shapes in the room with their day-time reality. The table. The chairs. The butterfly cage. The long rows of the bookshelves. The tall column of the lamp, now in night-time mode.

Mnemmne's small fist has left a dark sweet bruise on her hip, which she pets, delicately. She sleeps at last.

She dreams, again, and her mind turns to familiar paths. She dreams yet again that she wakes, and she half-recognizes that she is in the same dream-story, yet a third time.

Will she rise now and go out into the City, and visit the gallery, and look on the Land?

But there is no need for her to go anywhere. What she was going out to find has come to her, and a dark shape bends over her, moving.

It is too real to believe. A man? Here? How? She draws her breath, but before she can cry out, instantly and without movement or transition, it is upon her. *You? Is it you?* She is pinned, she is unable to move, her mind is somehow disconnected from her body. Surely it is a dream. As she is pierced. A touch, a touch, but it is not as it is when she touches herself, not like anything she ever anticipated, not the way she thought it might be at all.

Fuzzy-headed, Khresten awakes.

She hurts; never mind. It is necessary to hurry and there are excuses to make. Where is she going? Up to the Tower, of course, but best not to tell them that. There is some fuss now, some nonsense which she forgets at once as she dresses and dons her shoes, walks quickly to the city gate, to the Liftport, limps up the stairs, routinely greets the folk from the cities immediately above and below hers as they gather together.

But modest young Khresten has forgot her veil; a joke!

Never mind, she says. And where is her chaperone, ha? And there is some more foolish questioning here too, which she must deflect. But she will never need to be accompanied by a chaperone from now on, of course.

A moving town, the lift arrives, and slows so that they may embark. She hastens on board as if she could speed it up that way, and frets and paces as it continues to rise, stopping at every tenth city.

How hungry she is! Starving! She jumps to the refectory, eats pastry and pulses, sips tea. Her heart races. Her mind is full of darting thoughts. She looks around at the moving volumes of the Redoubt's inward parts, the heart and lungs of the pyramid, the passages and airways, as if she had never seen them before.

Her ears pop, the temperature falls slowly, and she dons her hooded coat at a certain height, as she always does. Up and up. Stop after stop, and from time to time need for more foolish words. And now she needs to go to piss. There is only a little blood.

It will not be long now. Yes, soon.

Be patient. I cannot make it go faster by any means.

Be patient.

Here at last is the top, the last stop. Above the last city. Now, past the armed men, up through the long twisting ramps. And here are the guarded Locks that lead up to the Tower and the low-pressure areas.

Now I yield up the Master-Word to them. Be silent. They will let us pass. Silent.

Do you not need a bell...? Well, never mind. Yes, we will go up quickly.

Now here is the chamber at the root of the Tower, and we call the smaller lift that takes us up the spine of the Tower. No, I will not be challenged, I am an Apprentice, trusted, we can go up safely, there is no rigid schedule for my attendance.

Ten levels more.

Here we are. This way.

Why should anyone stop me? I will show you this as well, that is all. You require to look on the Land. I understand. A brief look will be enough, yes, I understand.

This way.

Here is the chamber we are using. Through that doorway. My team will be within.

And who are these people? Senior Monstruwacans. That one is the Senior of my group

What?

What?

She starts forward in obedience to the clear instructions. *Kill them. Enter the chamber.* She stops. Her confusion is absolute.

She stands, alone and wild-eyed. The Senior regards her. She has seen the young men's hands move when they fight, and just so, his mind flashes. She senses his decision to violate courtesy and an instant later his thoughts have invaded hers, irresistibly. The flame of alert that detonates in him washes over her. He cries out words of warning and rushes to seize her, but she too is running, towards the doorway.

She is very fast and very strong. He is far stronger, grappling her with arms like brass, breaking her to her knee, smashing her temple against the door frame, extinguishing her consciousness and blinding what rides it, but he is not quite fast enough.

Through the door she has managed to take another glance at the active, telepathic, screen. Something that had entered her and grown there now joins with another part of itself, coming from elsewhere, and, completed, goes about its own busy purposes.

There is an interval. Then Khresten comes to herself again with a broken bloody head. She is lying on the threshold half in and half out of the chamber. The raised edge is sharp pain beneath her.

It is dark. Somewhere an alarm thunders endlessly.

Is this nightmare? Another dream?

If not a dream, then what are these shapes that surround her as she rises to her feet?

What men are so tall, so slim? What men writhe so? What men have so many strange arms or such great dark heads?

The braided columns of darkness rise about her, dancing. They trace the movement of her arms and body, gently touch her back and breast. They glide and dip, kind and gentle towards her alone.

The Master, all the most Senior of her guild, were utterly wrong, it seems. The Flowers are here, come to greet their friend and lover.

They plunge no thorn into her, but all around her is death. The walls have warped and most of the lights are out. Blood spreads. The Senior lies nearby, still, and the rest of the team are scattered among the equipment. Here and there other dark Flowers stir, tapping the still-churning mitochondria of the corpses or the hot energies of the power lines. Some of them are perched horribly, on or somehow inside the heads of the dead men and women, seeming to be rooted, moving very slowly. Compared to the monsters in the Land they are tiny: but mere size, she knows, means little to these beings. And they are growing. They move swiftly and easily. They leave smoothed tracks of altered matter on the floor, where metal and plastic have been invaded by Other life, forced temporarily into new structures, and released back to chaos.

She walks forward and the Flowers permit her to move. They flutter about her and brush her face, a numbing not-touch, but they do not obstruct her in any way. They seem to regard her as some sort of centre to organize themselves around, as they explore this new resource, this new kingdom. She understands now what has been done to her mind, what has lived inside her since that first touch out in the Land, and how she has been deceived in her dreams. Or how she has deceived. Perhaps the Flowers sense her only as some mobile part of the Redoubt, some fertile, receptive, area, some weak spot.

She thinks for an instant of their destruction. She only thinks, only for an instant, because in that instant her mind is compelled to alteration. It is not a threat, but simply the fact, known at a level below communication, that if she has enmity towards them she will cease to

exist before she has finished coherently forming the idea. She must remain their friend.

So, she will be a friend. It is a delicate balance: her thoughts flow towards hate, fear, horror, rage, again and again, and each time flinch back as if from a charged rod. But after a few seconds some sort of stability is reached. Now she is able to keep her emotions towards them those of love only. She recites to herself: *Do not think hatred. Remember, these are guests.*

She has survived. Perhaps others can. Perhaps she will live for a long time here, above a pyramid of slaves and dancing darkness. And that will be good, of course.

She comes to the screen, still somehow powered up. She picks up on the secondary link with her hands held above the hands of the dead and drained husk that sits there, and she looks out. She regards what hovers there in the night. Then she directs the Eye down and around to observe the radius of the Land just beyond the Circle.

Without surprise she notes what is growing down there. What intends, she supposes, to make of the Redoubt what it has made of the Rainbow, what it has made of her.

Her courage, and her silence, and even her ignorance, are important now.

She knows a little of what is coming. She knows, but will not by any means tell until she must, that lightning gathers and thunder rises in the channels of the ancient machines. Nerved by electronic synapses a million times faster than living flesh or stalking ghost, the Tower has gone into secondary lockdown mode. On the instant of first warning every passage between it and the Redoubt was flooded with incandescent plasmas, and now the corrosive energies that infest its outer shell are being fired to tenfold power. The major structural members are lit, and the vibration spreads from limb to limb. The ancient skeleton is aflame. The decks rock.

It is not simply power that is being mustered. These energies are coded, destructive, cunning, violating, sterilizing. Once confined in any way the pneumavores are surprisingly easy to destroy. The best tools of all are certain subtle subsets of electronic vibratory patterns, but many of the Eaters are delicate enough to be wounded and disrupted by a strong beam of coherent light, and if all else fails enough simple heat will do. The Sharks of the Ether can repattern themselves onto condensed matter and twist it to their will, can pluck out a man's soul by the roots, streaming fluid like blood, and feast on the delicate, lovely patterns, but the stones and fires of the early universe are not their proper home. They belong among the seas of electrons, the dust and gas and decaying protons, the delicate streams of plasma, the vacuum, the dying microwave echoes. They belong among the things that are to come, not among the energies of the world's short Youth.

But those energies linger here, burning hot, and the beings bred from them linger too. Bred from those energies and skilled in their use, ten million years of war have not left them defenceless, and they do not have to fully understand their enemies in order to destroy them.

And the Flowers can know nothing of this except what Khresten knows, and perhaps allows to slip from her

mind to them. This is why the wisdom of the Redoubt selects Khresten and her peers to send their minds out into the Land: why it chooses those like Khresten, who would very freely confess that they are only foolish, ignorant, young men and women.

Now, swiftly, war is declared. The walls of the chamber purl with fire. The floors shake. The doors spark. From every point and edge blooms a ghastly nimbus of light. Khresten's white-ash hair rises with the static charge, where it is not glued down with blood. The Eye, kept open by some unknowable pressure, is fused, as whatever cunning the Eater was using to keep the path available is checkmated by the ancient simplicity of a 6,000-per-cent overvoltage and a failsafe incendiary. Hissing metal scalds Khresten, and the Flowers dance madly.

She touches the nearest dark web and kisses it, with her mind.

Let me explain, she spieks. It is very sad for us. But I will tell you what I know.

The fire is the Tower responding. The cybernetics are fast. The Eye-terminal fused because the alarms have destroyed it. And the shields are up, not only round the Tower, but between the levels as well. The Tower, the machines, are fighting us. Not the men, not yet. It is only the machines we fight.

Can you kill the machines? Can you Eat their souls?

We are confined to this level and soon this level will be split up into tiny parts. Then each part will be burned clean and everything in it will be destroyed. But I will try to help you. I will do everything I can. I am trying to warn you now. It was so brave of you, to change yourselves, to make yourselves tiny and explore here, in this inferno. You only wish to live and grow, as all things do. I understand. I do not blame you. How you must hunger, out in the Land.

But there, at the door...

You see it turn silver-white? You do not like that fire, do you? I see you too can die. Oh, that is sad. That is sad. What can be done? How can we save ourselves?

Be very still. Perhaps the fire will not destroy us all. Retreat to me. I will do everything I can to help you. I understand.

I will protect you. It is only the machines we face. It is not the men yet.

Yes, the machines are terrible. But when the men come, you will know Fear.

Her left hand, unregarded, has been writing something over and over again on the surfaces around her, dipping back to the side of her head to pick up its red ink and then fluttering out again. It is writing over and over again in the darting strokes of the set-speech BEWARE DREAMS SEERS BEWARE YOUR DREAMS. She is right-handed, it is in reversed mirror script. She will not think about her left hand and anyway she cannot see well to that side any more since she struck her head so hard.

She has left her message. Now there is only one other thing to do.

Far below, the bowels of the Redoubt shunt more and more energy to the defence. Mechanism after mechanism

goes offline. The ventilators, the fans, the air and water pumps, are temporarily shut down as valves seat against reflux, and floods of power become available. The lifts cease to move. All industry stills. Throughout the pyramid and the Underground Country the lights dim.

The whole Redoubt braces for combat. In the cities, everywhere, there is the racing of armed men, but the Air Clog is unbreached, the temporary pneumavore activity at ground level outside it fading, and it will not be that kind of fight. Instead, the Earth-current, normally diverted into a hundred quiet streams, is being shaped to flow upward for one single purpose, to be forged and barbed by the instrumentalities of the Tower into a sword of defence.

The outer shell of the Tower is totally sealed. The sensors that were acting as paths have been destroyed, internal barriers have successfully prevented any spread of corruption within the structure, and the passages between it and the Redoubt are incandescent, triply impassable. The defence has held firm, above and below. The surviving Monstruwacans turn to counterattack. It is time to harrow the heart of the invasion.

The energies of the Tower are concentrated on the single infected level, and each segment is sterilized and cleared off in turn. Platoons of shielded and nightsuited Watchmen advance through secured areas in the practised and ordered succession, setting the touchpoints, channelling and guiding the rivers of light. Before them, plastic burns, flesh burns, metal burns. Planes of lightning criss-cross the open spaces as the air burns and then submits to its duty, conducting the patterns of hatred and defence which web the structure, tighter and tighter.

If need be, the entire Tower can be melted like a candle. But that will not be necessary.

Khresten stands amid a shrinking crowd of otherness and weeps to see each of them die and vanish. Ozone and nitrous oxides scorch her lungs. She bleeds, she staggers. Not long, now.

The walls belly and drip fire. The hammering pulses invade the raised metal overfloor to a chorus of lightnings, and half the remaining Flowers wink out of existence. Others cling on to dead flesh, to the few remaining insulated structures, or to Khresten herself, protected by the console. They do not take revenge and do not attempt to communicate with her again. *We do not understand them either*, she thinks. *So must it always be*.

The last of them vanishes. Did they ever really spiek to her? Did her mind translate the unknowable into some sort of likeness of humanity? Was what she rendered to herself as dream speech and touch no more a communication than are the tropisms of a plant's root seeking nourishment? Than the eyes on the butterfly's wing?

It does not matter.

Like a swimmer clawing up out of murdering black water, she is herself again, her mind her own. She can see the armoured men approaching between the overlapping curtains of brilliance, but there is no rescue for her there, no touch, no warm community of life ever again. She is the enemy. All that remains of the invasion is the thing inside her, the thing that now she feels,

again, somehow interfering with her thoughts.

But you have not behaved well. She thinks. Not at all in the way that is proper for a guest.

I would be quit of you.

And now.

What is the proper, the graceful, way to go about this?

The room is a hell of light and power, brighter and brighter. She kneels down, lies down, embraces the fire, opens herself to it.

Does one of the watching warriors salute her?

The fire is not hot, but it erases all complexity in matter or energy, reducing it identically to molecular and electronic uniformity, be it flesh or cyber or ghost. There is no pain, only numbness as the nerves are destroyed. It burns through her, seeking Otherness. It unpicks each cell. It illuminates from inside the delicate bones of her skull and the flakes of her back.

They will seal this level, and when they have examined it they will burn every particle of matter in it to ash and gas, and name it Forbidden. They will read her message in burnt blood on the burnt metal and they will burn it and burn her, too.

But they will learn from her words and they will praise her, for she was faithful, she made a good end.

Andy Robertson, who lives with his two daughters in the town of Lewes, East Sussex, has been an assistant editor of *Interzone* for many years. "The Eater," set in the world of William Hope Hodgson's far-future novel *The Night Land* (1912), is his first published story. Together with Nigel Brown, he runs a website devoted to that strange masterpiece, and is seeking similar stories to buy for publication on the site (see <http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/nightmap.html>).

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Ol' Blue-Eyes is Back

TELEVISION+AND+MEDIA+COMMENTARY+BY+EVELYN+LEWES

Before it first started up, I received a letter asking for my opinion on the likelihood of success of the proposed Sci-Fi Channel. I wrote back saying that it would have to have good programming a large part of the day, that I didn't think that there were enough such programmes, and that the name was guaranteed to drive all serious science-fiction fans away, so I didn't hold out much hope for it. When it first appeared, it had the most egregiously awful programming, repeated on a four-hour cycle through the day, and they had kept the childish name. I subscribed for a while, watched all the *Ray Bradbury Theatre* stories (some of which were even half-way decent), and got thoroughly fed up with all the other drek. Apart from the cheesy mechanistic station idents and the endless repeats of something that might or might not have been *Lost in Space*, there was the patronizing and insulting *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, where a child and a couple of "robots" watched, silhouetted against the screen as if they were sat in front of us, really bad sci-fi movies from the 1950s, and kept up a stream

of inane commentary that both ruined any chance of enjoying the film on its own limited merits (I do actually enjoy this stuff!) and singularly failed to entertain in its own right.

There seemed to be a vogue for this at the time. *Italian Stripping Housewives* (or *Tutti Frutti* as I believe it was known in its native Italy) featured a game show where women removed items of clothing in response to being asked questions, and a contingent of lovely lasses danced ran-



domly and then one revealed her breasts in order to show which fruit was attached to a nipple. This account is vague and muddled because the proceedings were conducted entirely in the original Italian, but with a post-modern ironic English voice-over commentary in shrill Welsh accents. The entertainment was not allowed to try to exercise its limited appeal, but was rather treated as cheap junk to give a springboard to an unfunny commentary. (Oh, I should explain that *Italian Stripping Housewives* was on the Bravo channel; *The Sci-Fi Channel* was bad, but not that bad – but some nights, there was precious little of anything to watch.) It can hardly be surprising, then, that I eventually disconnected, first from them, and then from the cable television service.

Anyway, I've digressed into the early history of fantastic cable television in the UK because, last year, I resubscribed to cable in order to gain access to digital television, and in the foofaraw that goes with such things, found myself committed to receiving *The Sci-Fi Channel* again (and Bravo, but the less said of that the better). So



Dune — above: Alec Newman as Paul Atreides manfully ignores the outrageous headgear of Princess Irulan (which is always some manifestation of butterflies), played by Julie Cox. Previous page: Barbora Kodetova as Chani, Paul's mistress and great love, with the elderly Bene Gesserit Mother Ramallo (played by Drahomira Fialkova) whom Jessica takes over from. Below: Irulan at court, where "every scene becomes a feast of detail for the eyes." Opposite: Saskia Reeves as Jessica, Duke Leto's mistress, with their daughter, Alia (Laura Burton) who was born after his death and is the instrument of his revenge.

I watched it, and it was surprising to discover that not only has it survived despite my prognostication, but it has prospered, and improved. Gone are the machines stamping out the station ID in the commercial breaks, and in their place appear a series of tiny futuristic vignettes of life with the aging wife, the designer daughter, and the eternal 3D plastic puzzle — I really must try to find out what the back story to them is and how they are intended to fit together. This alone makes the channel unique — I have never encountered another station that has an ID that is also possibly a puzzling short story in its own right.

But the programmes. OK, so they repeated the whole of *Babylon 5* over the summer, but everyone makes mistakes, and it has to be said that *B5* is very popular, and that this could thus have brought them even more viewers. And there seem to be endless reruns of *Seaquest DSV* and *Wonder Woman* (interesting also to note that that soap opera under the sea, *Seaquest DSV*, which I desperately wanted to like when it first appeared, is the responsibility of the same man who brought us *Farscape*, as *Seaquest* shares many of *Farscape*'s weaknesses). But there are also programmes like the rather eerie but delightful *VR5*, starring Lori Singer with David McCallum and Anthony Stewart Head, which, sad to say, was

cancelled and withdrawn before I ever got to see it, so that I have forever been left in the limbo of the cliffhanger at the end of season one that now never will bridge to a further season. And *Fantasy Island*, for all its self-congratulatory smugness, has the ability to turn in a truly satisfying or chilling tale by virtue of its clever choice of guest stars and writers of individual stories. This is an underrated series that I will return to in future.

Meantime, *Sci-Fi* continues to go from strength to strength, and has begun commissioning new work. A series of half-hour documentaries called *SF:UK* (apparently produced jointly with, and shown first on, Channel 4) was mostly merely embarrassing in its attempts to claim the UK as the spiritual home of sf, although the opportunity to see Nigel Kneale still spry and with a wicked gleam in his eye was worthwhile. The fundamental problem with this programme was that it relied too heavily on fans to fill out its time, and fat hairy people in pubs discussing the minutiae of their

obsession does not good telly make. But the programme did lead to my becoming aware of another recent British sf serial, *Invasion: Earth*, (reviewed by Wendy Bradley in IZ 132 and 138) which is currently showing opposite *Buffy* on Sky One on Friday evening at eight. I was keen to see this, as the tasters and trailer make it look good, but it is not possible for me to see it at that time, and, unusually for *Sci-Fi*, it isn't repeated. At all. Which is strange, given how they are so prone to repeating things at unearthly hours.

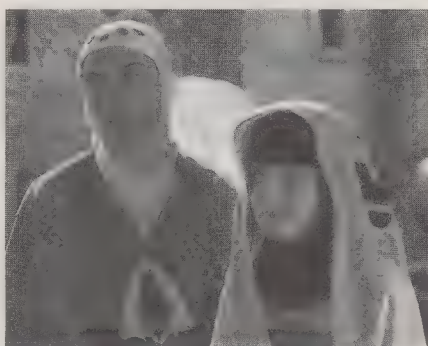
And the repeats are a good measure of the reason for this column. A couple of years ago, *The Sci-Fi Channel* finally put it's money where its audience wanted, and commissioned a television dramatization of Frank Herbert's classic novel, *Dune*. The result was screened as a three-part mini-serial at the beginning of the autumn 2001 season in the UK, is out now to rent or buy on video and DVD, and it is stunning. A fundamental problem with adapting pre-loved classics to another medium is precisely the pre-known nature of the beast; the audience already know it and so have expectations, and such expectations become both a foothold in the marketplace and the downfall of the project if they're not met. There is an interesting parallel here. I read *Dune* in the mid-1970s, and *The Lord of the Rings* in the late 1960s. While I took away certain impressions from both books, I didn't remember the story line of either. Having just seen the first film episode of *The Lord of the Rings*, I can report that it is tremendously loud and beautiful and impressive, but I still don't have a clear idea of the story. Whereas *Dune* is quiet and beautiful and impressive, and has a much more coherent narrative that I have now grasped.

The Lord of the Rings tries to make everything look real; this is a mistake in my view, as some of the effects sim-



ply don't work – I particularly hated the swirling helicopter shots that made me feel sick while not apparently being anyone's point-of-view but rather camera trickery to hide a paucity of detail. *Dune* actually looks like a televised stage play with certain key external scenes filmed with special effects, and the result is a very effective hybrid that plays to television's strengths while minimizing its weaknesses. Thus there are some truly awesome moments of drama (which is a phrase I could never have imagined myself typing with regard to a television drama before seeing this one), and these are achieved almost entirely through lighting effects. The blue eyes of the spice-addicted fremen are shiveringly eerie, with eyes glowing out of hoods and in passing as glances meet the camera-eye and turn away. Coloured light is used to paint the background scenery, although other visual devices are also used – the Harkonnens appear entirely in red, while in the Harkonnen household itself nothing is square, and the camera is always tilted. The effect is surprisingly menacing. The planet itself is a constant presence in a most surprising way – it looms brightly in the outer space scenes, but in any scene where the action in some way ties the character's fate to the fate of the planet (which, let's face it, is most scenes), a lighted circular object is made to be behind them and impinge on the outline of their head. This simple device sounds almost tacky, but in fact is so effective that it began to make my skin crawl after a while. Blue is used to indicate the House Atreides (which is convenient given the blue eyes of the fremen) and natural light is used for the imperial court, but always with an opulent set, so that every scene becomes a feast of detail for the eyes. Green hardly ever appears, because it indicates the prophesied paradise to come, so that its rare use as a setting but more often as a tinge to other colours is very telling.

The most effective use of light is for the most stagey and least realistic scenes – Paul Atreides's visions, where, exactly as would happen in a theatre, the lights go out, spotlights come on and the scene is different, they go out and others come on again with different colours and the scene is changed again, and the whole effect is nightmarish and numinous and very strange in your own living room. But probably the most dramatic use of lighting is the final scene where the Emperor's daughter finally claims Paul Atreides as a husband, but in a political alliance, and her isolation compared to the great loves the Atreides men have with their mistresses is wonderfully delineated by the light of



the setting sun coming through the palace doors and casting her shadow, long and alone, towards Paul's throne but never actually touching it.

Finally, however, what makes *Dune* a triumph is the acting, which is exactly right. Of course, the use of British character actors for most of the major roles probably saved money while providing an extra frisson of strangeness for the core American audience, but their skill at immersing themselves in their roles and producing fine and moving performances is what makes the production gel. Saskia Reeves is an unusual casting for Paul's mother, Jessica, but she makes the role her own and by the end you wonder how you could have imagined her any other way. Ian McNeice as Baron Harkonnen makes truly vile a role that could too easily have been overblown into a caricature villain. Duncan Idaho (a character whose name is forever confounded in my head with Goldry Bluscoe, Indiana Jones and Nevada Smith, simply it would appear because they always use both names) is the one weak link, with the actor, P.H. Moriarty, merely speaking his lines, relying for effect it would appear purely on his rough Cockney accent. Perhaps they were looking for an underplayed part, but as the rest of the acting is less than histrionic, he does appear to be walking through the show rather than taking part.

The battle scenes are quite good, although often risible – riding formations of worms into battle looks particularly silly – and are probably included to please action-hounds. But still the battle uniforms are beautifully thought out, so that there is never any doubt who is doing what to whom, and I was not overwhelmed with revulsion at the slaughter. Of course, if this were a theatrical production, one wouldn't be, and it begins to feel more and more as if this is the effect that was being worked towards. If it is, then it works well, and is to be recommended. The DVD is on my Xmas list to Santa, and if it doesn't come, then I shall go out and buy it myself.

Which brings me to repeats. *The Sci-Fi Channel* only ever advertise a single showing of any particular pro-

gramme. Occasionally I miss an episode of *Earth: Final Conflict* or *Space: Above and Beyond* and it came as something of a surprise to discover that they are both repeated twice at more convenient times than advertised. This makes the non-repeat of *Invasion: Earth* all the more galling, and I have been in touch with their publicists about this. But, finally, the joy of *Dune* was that it was repeated twice, so I got to see each episode three times in the course of a week, and that the final showing each week, just after midnight on a Tuesday, was shown without advert breaks. Truly a wonderful experience, but as my video simply can't do justice to the visuals, I still want that DVD.

Evelyn Lewes

At the end of my last column, I trailed the next as being titled Roddenberry's Children. This is currently on hold as Sky One seems to have lost Andromeda half way through series two and The Sci-Fi Channel is taking longer than expected to show the whole of Earth: Final Conflict. Rest assured, said column will appear when the television stations condescend to show the remainder of the programmes it concerns.

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REVIEWED

Something More (Gollancz, £17.99) **S**is, by the count on its inside back cover, Paul Cornell's thirteenth (plus "several for children") book, although it is his first "proper" novel. Alongside the television tie-in novelizations, he has written six original Dr Who novels and created a character as a companion for Dr Who, Professor Bernice Summerfield ("Bennie"), who was first used to try to keep alive Virgin Publishing's "New Adventure" series after the BBC clawed back the Dr Who book rights, and who subsequently has become a central character in her own series of books and audio dramas published by Big Finish. This is relevant because the opening of this novel is so Bennie-like that it wouldn't be surprising to discover it is an outtake or a false start for yet another Bennie book, with one of the central characters, Rebecca Champhert, lying in the back of a cart travelling along a cobbled street in Charlton, coming out of a two-day hangover in the year 2248. Honestly, you feel like shouting "Bennie!" to see if she'll look round in surprise.

First fantastic novels sometimes appear a little tentative, especially in the light of later, more confident work. So it is surprising to find the same effect here. Most obvious is the title – *Something More* is about as non-specific, vague, airy-fairy and tentative as you could possibly get away with as the title of a book and still feel that it conveyed *something*, however little. But then, too, the nice solid opening mentioned above is undercut by being the first of three prologues that introduce different characters in different time zones with no apparent relationships at all. And then, when we finally begin to read chapter one, we find yet another set of characters! These marks

of tentativity are, however, illusory – when the story finally does get going, it is perfectly solid, everything hangs together properly, and it becomes plain that this perplexing series of different openings is completely necessary. I have to admit to having read the opening of this book several times and being unable to continue because when I put it down I couldn't remember where I was next time I picked it up. So I set aside an afternoon, and spent a couple of hours properly getting to grips with the book and it was time well spent.

Of course, I can't blame Cornell for my inattentive reading, but I had read and enjoyed his Dr Who books and was keen to read this one too. Readers coming to his work cold might not be as committed or as assiduous as I was,



and it would be well to make the openings of future novels a little less demanding.

Once it gets started, the novel becomes a joy. The setting is the near future, 2248 or thereabouts, although there are many explanatory flashbacks as far as 1917, and a couple of excursions to 22 AD and ten million years BC. After an event in 1998 that turned another central character, Booth Hawtreay, into apparently living but immortal Blu-Tack and ambassador for the Aurigans, the Brunian heresy has come to dominate the Church of England, a major economic catastrophe has collapsed communications and Britain has reverted to a kind of Keith Roberts version of England, with current and future technology existing within but often not supported by a quasi-mediaeval political system. Huge swathes of Britain have reverted to virgin forest, and each of the four areas of civilized influence that remain are governed as personal fiefdoms by their dominant family.

If all this isn't complex enough, the arrival of the Aurigan ambassador and the subsequent rise of the Brunian heresy have given a scientific basis to the investigation of ghosts, so within this cleverly crafted science-fiction novel we have historically accurate Christian heresy, ghosts that are real, mediaeval savagery, and, last but not least, transcendence – yes, there is even an explanation of where we go when we die.

The mark of a good writer is if they take something I don't like and make it work for me. Spider Robinson does this with time travel. I can't abide time-travel stories, because they defy causality; Robinson makes the reinforcement of causality the pivotal point of his time-travel stories. Cornell does something similar here with time travel, but it is not nearly as central to his story. He does, however, describe in exact detail what happens when one of his characters is shot in the head. Usually, this kind of thing just grosses me out, because it appears to be there solely to revel in the detail – the living breathing human being that until moments before we were engaged with is turned into a meat target, an object, and verbally dismembered and abandoned. Cornell manages to describe exactly, moment by moment, a bullet hitting a woman in the head, and *not* gross me out, because once her physical self has been splattered over the wall behind her, she is still a consciousness whose point-of-view is the focus of the story. Something magical, transcendent has happened, and it appears to be exactly that, but this is *science* fiction, and there is an explanation.

At the end of this book I felt both a wonderful sense of completion – all the loose ends are tied up perfectly and

everything makes sense – and a burning need to go back and read the whole thing again to see how all the things I missed the first time through fit into the larger picture that I now have. Finally, it reminded me of Peter Hamilton's *Night's Dawn* trilogy with its complexity and dabbling in spiritual/transcendent affairs, but he doesn't quite have Hamilton's deft touch with the plot management yet. Cornell also has one or two irritating verbal tics that a good copy editor could iron out at a single sitting. He should make sure they are, because I don't want to have to complain about anything in his next book.

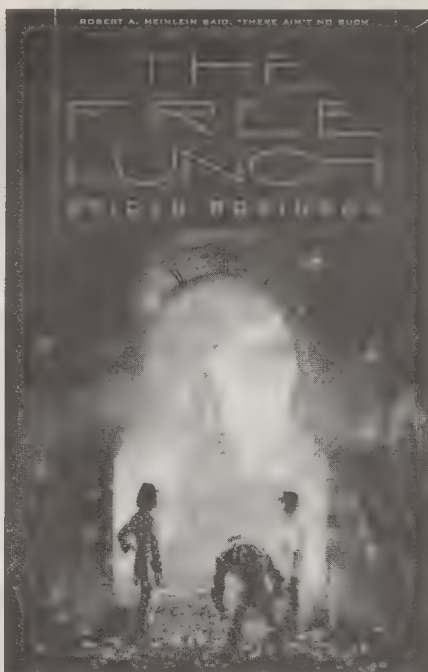
Spider Robinson had the rare distinction of making his debut in 1973 in a science-fiction magazine, *Analog*, with a story which by no stretch of the imagination could be considered science fiction. "The Guy with the Eyes" did, however, introduce us to many of the regulars and staff at Callahan's Bar, and the tall tales that were told within those walls have become legend, as has the bar, which Robinson finally was moved to destroy, in his version of the Reichenbach Falls scene, with a thermo-nuclear device.

Having launched a successful series of short stories, he then produced a few startling novels – *Telepath* and *Mindkiller* use clichéd Earthbound ideas, but bring such freshness, verve, and plain caring to them that we have to sit up and take notice, while, with his wife Jeanne, he produced *Star-dance* and its sequels, which gave us the Robinson magic in space.

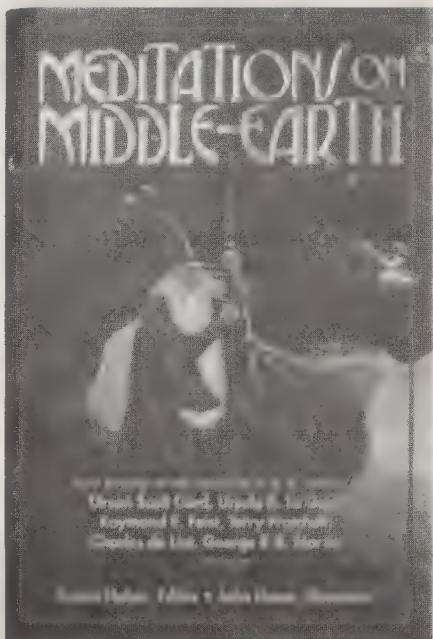
For a writer who has been popular for going on 30 years, however, he has not produced a lot of books, and I know because I possess many of them, despite the increasingly desperate thinness of the Callahan sequels, and a novel, *Lifehouse*, that is embarrassingly fannish. The last serious novel he produced on his own, by my reckoning, was *Time Pressure*, in 1987. So it was with mixed feelings, but no little enthusiasm, that I picked up his latest offering, *The Free Lunch* (Tor, \$22.95). And, exactly like my feelings, it is a mixed offering.

The acknowledgements at the front of the book offer a typical Robinson anecdote to the effect that this book was begun in 1984 as a collaboration with John Varley, and explains why it has been so long and that Varley is no longer involved – but he does it better than me, and you can read this page in the shop while you think about buying the book. But be warned: once you start reading a Spider Robinson book, you have to buy it, or suffer forever from those unrequited narrative hooks.

In this novel, a very bright twelve-year-old boy stows away in his favourite theme park, and the book explores his



adventures there including him being able to defend it from ruin partly because of his secret insider status. There is a lot of business with another secret insider, the so-called "Mother Elf," and it wouldn't be a Robinson novel without a time travel element. Funny, I can't stand time travel stories; nor do I believe any twelve-year-old, no matter how bright, could overcome the astonishing amount of pre-adolescent self-conscious bashfulness that afflicts boys of that age; and, frankly, the idea of running away to the circus to fulfil your fantasy way of life is such old hat that the cliché has been rendered meaningless because no one wears hats any more. So why did I enjoy this book so much? I guess it's that old Robinson/Heinlein magic. It's a romp; people care about each other in small and convincing ways; and the philosophy that



appears is rough hewn, often brutally implemented, and entirely clear. Spider Robinson is a natural story-teller whose only failing is that he doesn't tell nearly enough stories. Surely he could produce one modest 250-page novel a year. Then he could learn to turn down the brilliance of his characters just a notch or two so that we could see past the dazzle, and he could finally lose his obsession with John Lennon, whose work I find it very difficult to believe would be incorporated into a 21st century theme park in quite such a central fashion. I should be grateful he is still writing something – but if the last one is anything to go by, nigh on 15 years does seem an awful long time to wait for another book, especially if it will be as slight as this one.

Sometimes a book crosses my desk, and despite all overt indications, I find myself wondering what on Earth it is for. One such is *Meditations on Middle-earth*, ed. Karen Haber (St. Martins Press, \$24.95) for, despite the front cover statement – "New writings on the worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien" – and the back cover trumpet – "The World's Top Fantasy Authors in Appreciation of J.R.R. Tolkien, the Man and His Universe" – and the darkly mysterious painting of a wizard with a tall pointy hat, a staff, a long white beard and a flowing cloak on the cover (and the long list of famous names...), it is really not clear what this book is for, unless it is to cash in somehow on some forthcoming film. Because it mentions nowhere on the cover that its primary focus is *The Lord of the Rings* (TLotR) – and Tolkien's name is set in less noticeable type than "Orson Scott Card, Ursula Le Guin, Raymond E. Feist, Terry Pratchett, Charles de Lint, George R.R. Martin ...and more."

By now, you're probably equally wondering what on Earth this review is for, and that is fair, but when an unfocused object swims into our ken, sometimes we can only consider it either by unfocusing our scrutiny, or by focusing on one piece at a time. We've tried the former, and got nowhere, so let's try the latter. First, let us consider major forms that this book resembles but isn't. It isn't a collection of short stories by famous authors in tribute to Tolkien (although, given those names, I rather wish it had been); nor is it a book of academic essays designed to deepen our understanding of particular aspects of Tolkien's writing (although Le Guin's essay does tend in this direction). In fact, it isn't a book of essays about Tolkien or his work in any strict sense at all, except in so far as *The Lord of the Rings* features in every essay. No, there are few clues outside the text, so in order to find out what the book is for, you are either going to have to read it, or take the short cut



and read this review to the end.

I read the book. I read every word, and with that hindsight I can tell you that it might be a clue that it says modestly on the title page, "A Byron Preiss Book." Preiss has a certain reputation within the fan community which I have heard is reinforced by this book.

But the first real clue is actually out there on the cover. Below all those famous names, next to the Editor's name, it says, "John Howe, Illustrator." Now, why would a book of essays need an illustrator? Open the book and leaf through, and you find a liberal sprinkling of pallid grey pencil drawings with citations beneath them that indicate that they are illustrations of specific parts of either *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. Obviously, these illustrations were not commissioned by anyone with anything to do with Tolkien, so they must simply be the artist's own interpretation of the scenes – and finally it becomes clear that what this is is a collection of writings by famous writers that is intended to tell us what Tolkien meant to them.

This, of course, is the source of the lack of focus: it isn't a book about Tolkien, it's a series of fan-pieces that each explore what Tolkien's work means to the individuals involved (albeit the fans are mostly highly respected authors of fantasy in their own right). Which is fine if you're interested in those particular individuals, but plainly if what you are interested in is Tolkien, then what you are being sold here is a bill of goods, a collection of pieces with about as much connection to one another as one would expect to find in a collection of anecdotes about "what I was doing when I heard Kennedy had been assassinated."

After the editor's preface (really another anecdote with a bit of publishing history thrown in) and the introduction by George R.R. Martin, first up is Raymond E. Feist, with the most forgettable piece of prose in the book. There's nothing bad about it, it just isn't memorable, and would not lead me to seek out his fiction. And then Poul Anderson. I'm not a great Anderson fan either, but his work does have some merit. However, by this time I was getting fed up with the same bits of information, and wondered if every essay in the book was going to tell me that, with *TLotR*, Tolkien had revived and made respectable fantasy and created a whole new publishing genre.

I read this book because *TLotR* means a lot to me and a great deal more to my wife. But it has about as much relevance to Tolkien's true fans as the forthcoming film appears to have, if the clips and trailers we have seen are representative, and I shall be recommending that she doesn't waste her time with it (but see below). The

essays here are good workmanlike products of their respective authors, and I was fascinated to discover that Robin Hobb read *TLotR* in a disused meat store in Alaska, while Terry Pratchett started reading fantasy with *TLotR* and says as a result he went on reading, and "since, if you read enough books, you overflow," he became a writer. But it has to be said that as the book goes on, it gets duller. Douglas A. Anderson's is a perfectly workmanlike survey of the whole published canon of Tolkien's work, but is longer and less scintillating than Esther Friesner's or Terry Pratchett's efforts, and suffers for its late position in the book. Orson Scott Card makes a brave attempt to rescue *TLotR* from modernist literary criticism, but could have said what he said in half the length. At the back of the book is a rambling unfocused and uninteresting interview with two artists, Tim and Greg Hildebrandt, who apparently made their reputation painting Tolkien calendars in the 1970s, and buried behind this so you might miss it if you were not as assiduous a reader as I am is a painful memoir from Terri Windling who reveals that she spent much of an abused childhood in hiding from her parents with a copy of *TLotR* for company.

Undoubtedly the best essay in the book is Michael Swanwick's "A Changeling Returns," which could truly be called a meditation, but on fatherhood rather than Middle Earth. It is undoubtedly worth the price of the book alone, and is the only one I shall be recommending that my wife reads. The best essay of all, however, doesn't appear in the book, but rather was published in the previous issue of this magazine (*IZ* 174). Gene Wolfe's magnificent "The Best Introduction to the Mountains" was written for this book, but withdrawn before publication. We can only speculate as to the reason, but given that all of the essays under discussion here are personal statements focused mistily around reading of fantasy for pleasure or as escape, Wolfe's clear-eyed grasp of the real-world import of Tolkien's work, way beyond merely making money by using it as a vehicle for special effects, might have appeared rather too strong a draught for the editors and publishers of this volume.

Meditations on Middle Earth is bound to do moderately well solely on the strength of the names it contains. But it is almost certain to prove a disappointment to anyone who comes to it looking for a way forward from Tolkien, which, given the pantheon of current market leaders featured in it, is a great shame. Read the Wolfe, read the Swanwick, and read the Le Guin. And read your favourite author; but expect nothing much from the rest.

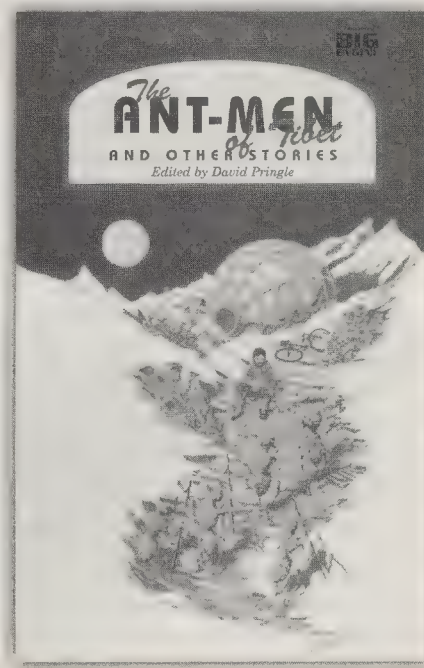
Paul Brazier

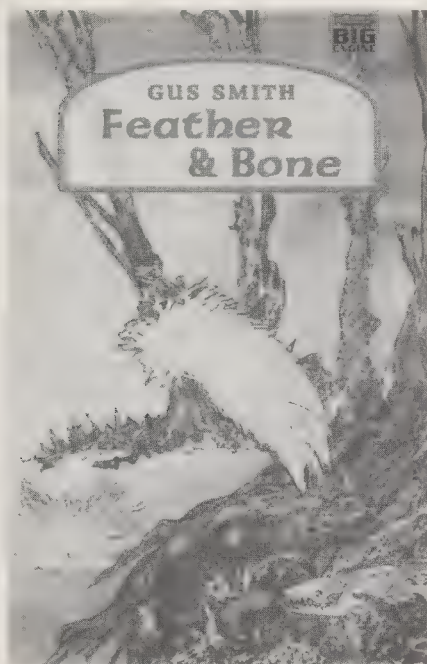
Racy and Imaginative

Liz Williams

One might still hear someone say with a sigh, as they replace their battered copy of *Sexton Blake Meets Fu Manchu* upon the shelf – "They don't write 'em like that any more." If you happen to know such a person, then the birthday present issue is swiftly resolved – they do write stories like "that" these days, and ten of them are to be found in the latest anthology from Big Engine: *The Ant Men of Tibet, and Other Stories* edited by David Pringle (Big Engine, £8.99), a collection drawn entirely from *Interzone* itself.

The title story is one of Stephen Baxter's, and it's a classic of the pulp genre. Boy finds immense flying bottle, lands in strange place, meets ant-men and – despite the worrying





my own writing). Overall, however, the collection is a strong one: something for everyone, well told.

Gus Smith's novel *Feather & Bone* (Big Engine, £8.99) is a formidable entrant into contemporary British fantasy, set in a late 1990s Northumberland in a farming community beset by BSE and the malign presence of an ancient spirit.

Agriculture Ministry worker Alison Rigg is sent to the area to investigate a suspected case of BSE among local cattle, but what she discovers is much older and vastly more unpleasant. Alison swiftly becomes embroiled in the problems – both supernatural and social – of an isolated family: the silent witch child and her brother; the weak poacher father Angus and his malevolent wife. Snatched from her own body, imprisoned in a family that is rapidly descending into nightmare,

Alison can rely only upon her own resources and the tenuous support of two local witches.

The atmosphere of *Feather & Bone* is claustrophobic and menacing, conjured by Smith's evident knowledge of this particular landscape and by a spare, unsentimental prose which avoids melodrama and grips the reader until the tale's conclusion. The novel portrays a dark, almost shamanistic, version of witchcraft which nonetheless retains a strong division between good and evil. At the end of the book, indeed, one remains in doubt as to which evil is the greater: the old and malignant force which enthralls the valley, or the modern horror conjured up by the scientifically-reliant agricultural community. A word to the faint of heart: read *Feather & Bone* with caution if you're squeamish – and it's not one for vegetarians, either.

Liz Williams

absence of anything resembling a British consul – manages to adapt to life in a new environment. Baxter's ebullient, chin-up-old-chap story rattles along to a surprisingly sombre conclusion; perhaps a nod to what is often regarded as *IZ*'s trademark downbeat tone. The same cannot be said, however, of the endings of many of the stories in the anthology: Molly Brown's strange, racy and imaginative "The Vengeance of Grandmother Wu," or Eugene Byrne's cowpat-winning shaggy dog story "Alfred's Imaginary Pestilence." Alastair Reynolds's "Byrd Land Six" brings the Antarctic adventure yarn up to date by invoking a hard-science solution to a problem that lies at the heart of contemporary physics, and Chris Beckett's excellent "The Warrior Half-and-Half" is reminiscent of Gene Wolfe in its merging of ancient legend and far-future history. Keith Brooke puts a new spin on the mermaid tale, whilst Nicola Caines's beautifully-told "Civilization" pays homage to that most romantic piece of obsolete technology: the steam engine. I am also glad to see Peter Garratt's priceless modern vampire tale "The Collectivization of Transylvania" back in print. I did not, alas, take to Jayme Lynn Blaschke's "The Dust": not really enough of a story here to engage me, and peopled with very stock characters. The collection ends with Eric Brown's sombre tale "Vulpheous."

If I have a criticism of the anthology as a whole, it is that some of the stories don't have strong enough endings: few of them evoke the gasp of startled surprise that makes for classic short fiction, though I would argue that this is a current problem with the genre and is not peculiar to this anthology (or, if I'm ruthlessly honest, to some of

New Paths to Hell

Matt Colborn

Liz Williams's debut novel *The Ghost Sister* (Bantam Spectra, \$5.99) describes a well-intentioned – but misguided – attempt to eradicate a people's alien nature. As a result, it becomes a study of the inability of human factions to accommodate unfamiliar points of view.

The story begins with a man named Eleres' search for a cure to his sister's mysterious affliction. Eleres, an inhabitant of a planet named Monde D'Isle, soon becomes entangled with members of an exploration team from the Earth colony Gaia. Gaia – which we know only through the description of the exploration team – is a world where the natives have achieved harmony with nature through extensive control of the environment. Monde D'Isle is a former colony too, but in contrast to Gaia it is a wild, uncontrolled place, whose inhabitants are subject to a mysterious frenzy known as the bloodtide. The only ones who escape from this frenzy are those who are sick, like Eleres' sister, Mevennen.

To their horror, the Gaians encounter a pack of Monde D'Isleans killing a child during their bloodtide. When it is discovered that the condition is probably due to the energy

fields generated by the abandoned technology of the first settlers, one of the Gaians decides to try and turn this generator off. But the Gaian mission's "quantum anthropologist," Shu Gho, gradually comes to realize that the fields have produced a unique type of human being and attendant culture, and that turning them off could spell disaster.

Shu Gho attempts to contact the Monde D'Isleans, and first runs into Mevennen and later her brother. Unfortunately, the locals think that she and the other Gaians are ghosts. One of the reasons for this is that the Gaians appear somehow two-dimensional to most of the Monde D'Isleans, because the energy lines facilitate an enhanced mode of perception within them. Mevennen's illness prevents this kind of perception, and she also appears to her people as "two-dimensional."

This scenario allows for some novel twists on the otherwise familiar first-contact story. One of the most fascinating passages of the book is when the Gaians attend, uninvited, the funeral of the slain girl. The Monde D'Isleans, seeing them as ghosts, accept their presence as a natural part of the proceedings. In other words, they rational-

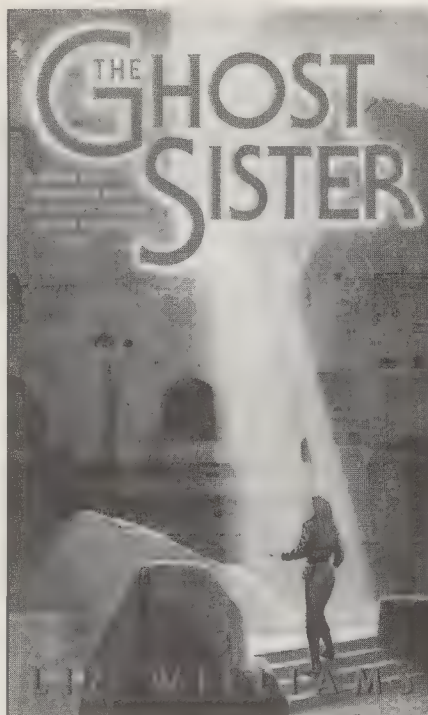
ize the alien's presence into their own world-view. This rationalization becomes problematic when Shu Gho attempts real contact.

Such culturally conditioned blindness is not unique to the Monde D'Islands. It is a Gaian high-priestess, Dia, who decides to effect changes on Monde D'Isle for the inhabitants' "own good." As the story unfolds, Shu Gho realizes that such individual inflexibilities can condition individuals to exhibit responses to situations that are often dangerously inappropriate. This situation is illustrated not only by Dia, but also by Bel, another expedition member, who fatally identifies Mevennen's plight with a previous situation that she encountered back home on Gaia. One slight criticism of the novel is that, while such differences are often commented on, there is often not enough contrast between the primary voices through which the story is told. For example, Eleres' first-person narration of events sometimes sounds too similar to the third-person narration of Shu Gho's and Mevennen's experiences. Given that cultural and social contrasts are the novel's central concern, this is more important, and noticeable, then it might otherwise be.

The Ghost Sister is in some ways reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*. In both novels, the starfaring portion of humanity sends emissaries to a former colony which has lost touch with the main interstellar portion of the human race, a colony which has also forgotten its extraplanetary origins. Because the Monde D'Islands are evolved humans, not aliens, Liz Williams is free to explore anthropological ideas in a way also reminiscent of Le Guin. For example, Williams touches upon alternative ideas of gender identity; for most of Monde D'Isle's inhabitants are bisexual.

Le Guin's influence is certainly not an overwhelming one, because Liz Williams generally puts her own "spin" on the various themes explored. Indeed, this is the sort of sf one wishes there could be more of, and as an exploration of cross-cultural contact, though sometimes tentative, it is often successful. On the whole, it is a thought-provoking, lyrical read.

Some of the fantasy that works best has science-fiction-style plots. In many conventional fantasies, the protagonists must protect the status quo from some external threat. In science fiction, the status quo is often a restriction that must be transcended. Several of the best stories in *Starlight 3*, edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden (Tor, \$23.95), are prime representatives of "science-fiction-style" fantasy stories and often deal with traditional, mythological figures hav-



ing to abandon the stereotypes of their particular myth in order to survive. Alternately, an old myth is seen through new, critical eyes.

In Ted Chiang's "Hell is the Absence of God" God, angels and fallen angels regularly and visibly intervene on the Earth, and their passing opens gateways that afford mortals glimpses of heaven or hell. As some believe happens in our world, those with faith in God's ultimate good intentions go to heaven and those who don't descend to hell. Yet, even with the proof of regular angelic visitations, the universe, or "God" remains ludicrously unjust, as the protagonist, wrestling with the death of his (blessed) wife is constantly reminded. It's a comedic but brutal commentary on – literally – blind faith.

Colin Greenland also provides us

with a fleet of angels in the delightful "Wings," which depicts another otherwise ordinary world where the divine beings have appeared. The beings in Greenland's story might represent that which we often wish for, but find unattainable. They also represent a loss of the familiar, as the slightly predictable ending demonstrates. Nevertheless, the doctrine of change, and transformation, is a science-fictional sentiment also.

In "Wolves Till the World Comes Down" by Greg van Eekhout the gods who stand over our rather tatty world are Norse. Ragnarok is on the wind, and, until the end of the story, the gods follow the prophecies of the end-times as blindly as automata. However, an act of self-sacrifice by Baldr ensures that the prophecies cannot be fulfilled, and the remaining gods find themselves in a new, uncertain future.

Another way of making fantasies "science-fictional" is to play cleverly with the stereotypes of a familiar fantasy trope. In "Gestella" a woman who becomes a wolf at each full moon ages as quickly as dogs do. Susan Palwick uses this accelerated life span, and its consequences, to illustrate the exploitative nature of some male relationships with women. The climax is heartrending. Similarly downbeat is "Interview: On Any Given Day" by Maureen F. McHugh, about an HIV-type virus transmitted to a youngster via a "rejuvenated" oldster. It's a fine story, underlining the unforeseen but tragic effects that some new biotechnology might have.

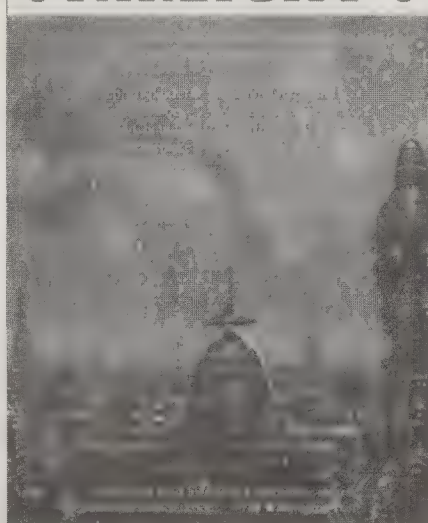
Cory Doctorow's story "Power Punctuation!" makes a similar point, but somewhat more flippantly. It follows the progress of a keen but naïve Japanese lad into the corridors of corporate power, and on the whole it's very funny. Another comic tale, but a drier one, is Susannah Clarke's "Tom Brightwind; or, How the Fairy Bridge was Built at Thoresby." It's well written, but more pedestrian than some of the other stories. Also interesting, but not entirely successful, is "The Barbarian Queen: Thirteen Views" by Jane Yolen. This is a clever recounting of the meeting of a queen and a barbarian from 13 different viewpoints. Here is another story which tries to address the problem of the multiple perception of events, but its climax is hard to follow.

In all, *Starlight 3* is a marvellous anthology of often refreshingly innovative short fiction. We need more publications of this quality.

Next up are a pair of short novels from the small press: *A Writer's Life* by Eric Brown (PS Publishing, £8), and *Nearly People* by Conrad Williams (PS Publishing, £8.00).

A Writer's Life is, as the title sug-

STARLIGHT 3



EDITED BY Patrick Nielsen Hayden

gests, a novel about writing and is, unusually for Brown, a fantasy. It is a modern version of the idea that inspiration has in part an external source, a muse, and that this muse is capable of transferring other gifts – like unnatural longevity – to the ones it favours. It also tells the story of Daniel Ellis's quest for the works of his favourite writer, Vaughan Edwards.

Ellis, also a writer, becomes increasingly obsessed with tracking down the truth about Edwards, especially when it becomes apparent that he has been around, under different pseudonyms, for an unnaturally long time. This search is undertaken in a primarily rural, contemporary Northern landscape, which makes a refreshing change from the urban landscapes of much recent fantastic fiction. It also sets the antiquarian, dilapidated tone of the novel.

Despite that tone, *A Writer's Life* is also concerned with the timeless nature of writing, represented by Vaughan Edwards's immortal muse. This supernatural "muse" is both the strength and weakness of the story. It is a strength because it allows us to see what happens when the life of an artist is unnaturally extended and he has time to fulfil his potential through several writing "lifetimes." It is a weakness because, in doing so, the plot relies on a "super-entity," which seems at times to be the modern-day version of the *deus ex machina*. Even if such a convention is well used – like here – it can still seem rather clichéd. On the whole though, a fine, atmospheric book, which bears comparison to the novels of Jonathan Carroll. One hopes that Brown will find time to write more works of fantasy in between the science fiction.

Nearly People by Conrad Williams is, unlike Eric Brown's, a predominantly urban fantasy, about a decaying sector of society imprisoned within a barrier which prevents the spread of an infection to the outside world. The protagonist, a woman named Carrier, is taught a strange kind of rebellion against those imposing this isolation by an enigmatic character called the Dancer. The Dancer seems to have the ability to manipulate the reality experienced by the inhabitants of the Howling Mile.

The Howling Mile itself is a decaying, phantasmagoric place, inhabited by such unpleasant beings as "mowers," which are creatures with machine-like mouths able to grind bone. The reality which Carrier, aided by the Dancer, glimpses is by contrast rural and idyllic, but is somehow dreamlike. (One wonders whether urbanites' dreams of paradise have become typically pastoral. If so, such dreams certainly contrast with the

medieval "City of God.")

Conrad Williams's vision is in places powerful, and certainly invokes claustrophobia. The novel has many of the familiar props of such works – rotting corpses, half-dead lovers, dilapidated buildings and a brutal police force representing a shadowy government in "the Hub." Stylistically it seems similar to China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, or the grottier ends of urban horror. It's also not unlike the world of M.

John Harrison's Viriconium stories. This isn't necessarily a weakness – Williams is writing within a (developing) tradition of urban fantasy, and traditions have conventions. However, *Nearly People* somehow lacks the distinctiveness of some other works, and, despite being well written, is ultimately not as memorable as it could be. Nevertheless, Conrad Williams can tell a story, and it compels, if nothing else.

Matt Colborn

The Last Author?

Mat Coward

I sometimes think I sense a certain impatience in the air around Robert Rankin's books. Written in invisible ink in the margins of his publisher's press releases are smiling-through-clenched-teeth questions like "When is RR going to be discovered? What does a guy have to do to be taken up around here?" He's written more than 20 novels, and sold plenty of copies, but you still couldn't really call him a Famous Author.

Transworld's publicists describe Rankin as a writer of "techno-gothic blockbusters," which means less than nothing, and as "the Father of Far-Fetched Fiction," which is actually a pretty good summary of what he does. *The Fandom of the Operator* (Doubleday, £16.99) is, in fact, his least far-fetched work to date – not in its subject matter, admittedly, but in its style.

Gary Cheese is a young boy in the

1950s, who is rather preoccupied with death. His attempt to reanimate the bestselling novelist P.P. Penrose (author of the now legendary Lazlo Woodbine thrillers, as well as the vastly inferior Adam Earth science-fiction novels) ends disastrously, but his interest in morbid matters continues. As we follow his life story, we gradually realize that Gary – the narrator – is keeping a terrible secret from us. As a young man he gets a job with the GPO, which, it turns out, is part of a project for communicating with the dead, called Flatline. Could this be his opportunity to apologize to Mr Penrose?

Though as funny and as inventive as any of its predecessors, this is a rather different Rankin novel. Its narrative is much more straightforward, and its prose more precise; more careful, showing signs of a degree of self-editing which hasn't been apparent



before. It is also considerably darker, containing some passages of really chilling horror; most noticeably, instead of his usual Neddy Seagoon-type harmless idiot protagonist, here we have one who is altogether less innocent (despite a plot development which to some extent lets him off the hook for past actions). It's a very good book indeed, but the slightly disturbing aftertaste it leaves is something new for Rankin. It will be interesting to see from future novels whether or not this is a deliberate and lasting change of direction. What is certain, is that Rankin has recently been paying far greater attention to story than he did in his earlier work.

The earlier *Web Site Story*, now out in paperback (Corgi, £5.99), is a more standard kind of Rankin book (if such a thing can be said to exist, which of course it can't), and not, I



felt, one of his best – though this may only be because it suffers from being inspired by that dulllest of yesterday's headlines, the Millennium Bug. In Rankin's version of history, the Bug was not the turn of the century's greatest non-event, but the first plague to be transmittable from computers to humans – leading one Big Bob of Brentford to confess that "I'm infected. I've got a bibbly bobbly wibbly wobbly, oh shit and salvation."

Even the least Rankin is a delight to those of us who maintain that Mr Far-etched is by far the best at what he does – and still would be, even if he weren't the only one who does what he does. It's also true that the greatest Rankin is naught but a bafflement to those who find, upon reading him, that neither the head nor the tail can satisfactorily be located. That's what makes him inescapably one of nature's born cults, rather than a famous author; indeed, he might even be the last cult sf/fantasy writer still working.

Mat Coward

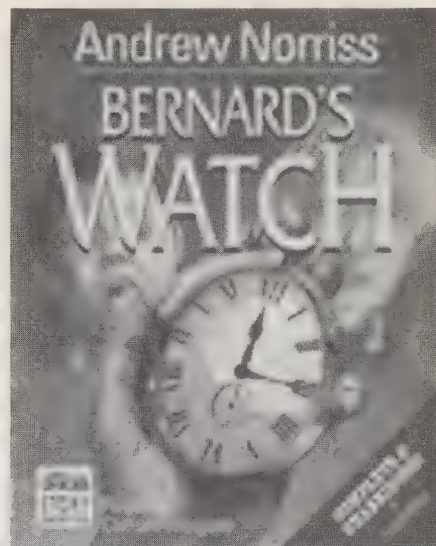
Anno Doctor

Paul Beardsley

The latest fantasy from Cavalcade Story Cassettes is *Bernard's Watch*, written by Andrew Norriss and read in full by Clifford Norgate. Intended for an age range of 10-13, it's the story of a boy who receives a watch which enables him to stop time. Consequently he is able to pass exams, excel at football and solve crimes. I couldn't help wondering at some of the issues that weren't properly addressed here, such as, isn't it cheating? and won't Bernard become over-reliant on the watch? Entertaining stuff nonetheless, even if you're well over 13.

Bernard's Watch (3 cassettes, 3 hours 25 minutes, £9.99) is available from Chivers Press Limited, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX (tel. 01225 335336; fax 01225 310771).

J.R.R. Tolkien: An Audio Portrait (2 cassettes, £9.99 or 2 CDs £12.99, 1 hour 50 minutes) makes no secret of the fact that it's cashing in on the *Lord of the Rings* movie. Not that I'm complaining; Brian Sibley, the man who adapted the famous trilogy for radio, has gathered together a fascinating range of interviews going back to the 1960s. The main interviewee is Tolkien himself, of course (he's the one who lights his pipe every time someone asks him a question), but we also get to hear a diversity of opinions, some of them strongly negative, and some very amusing in retrospect. (Did you know publisher Unwin was prepared to lose a thousand pounds



on *The Lord of the Rings*?) We're treated to Donald Swann's musical adaptation of one of the songs, and we hear the Elven languages spoken by their creator. This is illuminating stuff, sure to enhance one's enjoyment of the books – and Brian Sibley's radio serial for that matter.

If you don't already have a CD set of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, you could do worse than invest in *The Collector's Edition* (8 CDs, 7 hours 40 minutes, £49.99). Handsomely presented in a purple box, it comes with a 16-page booklet, the complete first and second series on six CDs, and a guide to the guide on two CDs, respectively labelled "The Programme" and "The Interview," which were first broadcast in 1998.

"The Programme" is narrated by the late Peter Jones. It's a documentary about the making of the series, done in the style of "the book," which is terribly fannish but sometimes amusing. It might not seem obvious now, but back in the late 1970s a bunch of heroic and talented people had to overcome the most incredible obstacles to get the radio series made at all. Accepted wisdom had it that you can't do comedy in stereo because the audience won't know which speaker the punchline will come out of. In "The Interview," the late Douglas Adams is





allowed to express his opinions at length, which is a good thing because they are always interesting, even if you don't necessarily agree with them all. One is left with the impression that Adams was as intelligent as he was funny, which is a mind-boggling concept.

The BBC Radio Collection continues to release soundtracks of lost *Doctor Who* stories, the most recent being *The Daleks' Master Plan* (5 CDs, 5 hours 20 minutes, £29.99) which features William Hartnell's Doctor. What with previous releases of Master Plan's neighbouring stories, it is now possible to listen to 25 hitherto unavailable episodes back to back. Possible, sure, but would you want to? Well yes, actually. These episodes are from a particularly rich and varied period of the series, and they do not suffer too badly from the loss of visuals. In any case, Peter Purves's narration on all 25 episodes goes a long way towards recapturing that sense of being there.

This lost saga begins with the four-part *Galaxy 4* (2 CDs, 1 hour 35 minutes, £13.99). The TARDIS crew encounter a bunch of beautiful-but-bad aliens and another bunch of hideous-but-good aliens on a planet that is due to explode. Nobody bothers to ask why; it's just something planets do, I suppose. This story is easily the weakest of the bunch but it does add

to the diversity.

The closing cliff-hanger leads straight into *Mission to the Unknown*, the "bonus episode" on the *Master Plan* CD set. This one-parter does not feature the TARDIS crew at all, but it's got the Daleks in it. *The Myth Makers* (2 CDs, 1 hour 40 minutes, £13.99) follows, a four-part comedy set in Ancient Troy. Fortunately for us, most of the humour is in the dialogue, which ranges from character assassination (Homer's heroes prove to be anything but) to the Doctor wishing he'd had time to put shock absorbers in the fetlocks of the Wooden Horse. Thirty-six years after it was broadcast, *Myth Makers* is still laugh-aloud funny.

Before the end of the fourth episode, however, things have taken a decidedly darker turn, and the slightly altered TARDIS crew are in no fit state to cope with an epic battle with the Daleks. But the 12-episode *Master Plan* is precisely what they have in store. As pulp sf goes, it has never been bettered, and stakes have never been higher. Our heroes race from planet to planet, to Earth in the year 4000 and Egypt during the time of the pyramid builders, encountering new aliens and one fondly-remembered old enemy. Major characters die along the way – not even the regulars are spared. *Master Plan* has its share of lighter moments, however. There's even a comedy routine involving a materialization on a cricket pitch which undoubtedly inspired a near-identical sequence in one of Douglas Adams's books.

What with its heart-pounding apocalyptic ending, *Master Plan* is exhilarating stuff. Astonishingly, the next story is even better. The four-part *The Massacre* (2 CDs, 1 hour 40 minutes, £13.99) sees the diminished TARDIS crew arrive in Paris in 1572, a few days before the infamous Massacre of St Bartholomew's Eve. I knew nothing about this period of French history, but was inspired to find out more; as a result the story has revealed new depths on subsequent listenings. Unusually, it is far more concerned with the people of the period than with the time travellers – Joan Young's portrayal of Catherine de Medici is especially chilling. The Doctor hardly features, although William Hartnell does play the Abbot of Amboise, who is (surprisingly enough) the Doctor's double. This story has its fair share of shocking moments, not least being the Doctor's callous abandoning of a young woman to her certain death. The final episode ends in pure bathos, but what the hey, we've just had half a year of *Doctor Who* at its very best.

BBC Radio Collection, PO Box 30811, London W12 0WN (tel 020 8433 2236; fax 020 8433 1040).

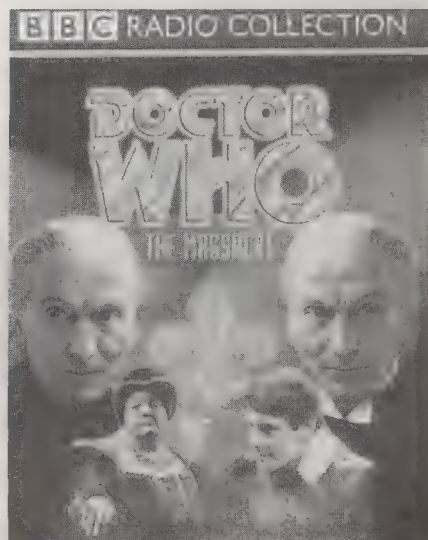
Meanwhile on the book front *Doctor Who* has inspired yet another range – novella-length hardbacks from a company called Telos. Their first release is *Time and Relative* and it's by Kim Newman. It is the first officially sanctioned story to be set before the TV series began in 1963 with *An Unearthly Child*.

Time and Relative takes the form of a diary, that of the Doctor's teenaged granddaughter Susan. The prose is at once convincing and compelling as Susan tells of her efforts to fit in during her stay in London through the extended winter of 1963. Her observations on life in England are often poignant as she struggles to come to terms with racism, fickle friendships, and the deliberate injustices perpetrated by teachers. At the same time the spirit of the age is evoked marvelously. It doesn't even matter too much that the ice monsters are yet another empty threat to humanity, because this is a book about people, right...

Unfortunately the Grown Ups (Susan's capitals) come into their own after about page 50, and that's when the book dips. A bunch of schoolchildren are murdered and their bodies are left in the school playground. Yet these Grown Ups, people who lived through the blitz, are literally unable to see the corpses because these things don't fit into their worldview. We're expected to take this seriously! A few pages later the uptight local vicar decides that human sacrifice is the solution, and the reader finally twigs that Mr Newman is taking the piss.

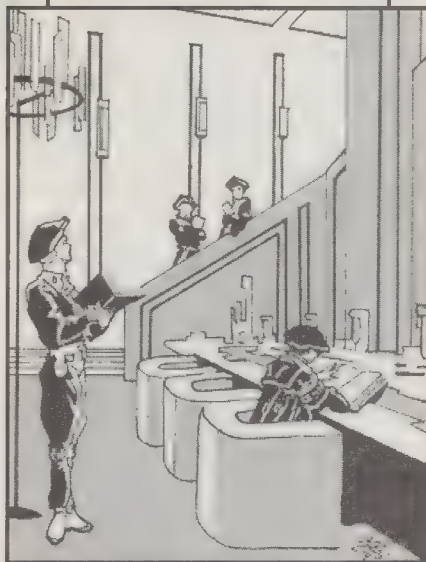
Time and Relative (121pp, £25 for deluxe edition with frontispiece by Bryan Talbot, £10 for ordinary edition, Telos Publishing Ltd, 61 Elgar Avenue, Tolworth, Surrey, KT5 9JP tel/fax: 020 8399 1921; online: <http://www.telos.co.uk>)

Paul Beardsley



THE ORIGINAL BBC TELEVISION SOUNDTRACK

BOOKS RECEIVED



NOVEMBER 2001

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in *quotes* following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Arden, Tom. **Empress of the Endless Dream: Fifth Book of The Orokon.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06374-2, xiii+448pp, hardcover, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the final book of this humorous and inventive five-volume sequence, it has rather a nice title; "Tom Arden" is a pseudonym for Australian-born author David Rain.) *15th November 2001.*

Arden, Tom. **Sisterhood of the Blue Storm: Fourth Book of The Orokon.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-330-0, 698pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 167.) *8th November 2001.*

Asimov, Isaac. **I, Robot.** "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711963-1, 249pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf collection of linked stories, first published in the USA, 1950; this is no. 18 in the dark-blue "Voyager Classics" series; it appears to be [gulp!] the 41st Panther-Grafton-Harcourt publishing since they first issued the title in 1968.) *3rd December 2001.*

Benson, E. F. **The Collected Ghost Stories of E. F. Benson.** Edited by Richard Dalby. Foreword by Joan Aiken. Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-432-8, xvi+624pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Ghost-story collection, first published in the UK, 1992; a bumper volume of some 54 stories by Edward Frederic Benson [1867-1940] which originally appeared in his individual collections *The Room in the Tower* [1912], *Visible and Invisible* [1923], *Spook Stories* [1923] and *More Spook Stories* [1934]; although it's copyrighted "1992, 2001," it appears to be a simple

reprint of the 1992 volume – which did not in fact contain *all* of Benson's supernatural fiction, but just the tales that appeared in the above-named collections; nevertheless, recommended.) *22nd November 2001.*

Bradbury, Ray. **The Martian Chronicles.** "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711962-3, 235pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf collection of linked stories, first published in the USA, 1950; this is no. 19 in the "Voyager Classics" series; it appears to be the 16th Panther-Grafton-Harcourt publishing since they took the title over from Corgi Books in 1977 [it was previously known in the UK as *The Silver Locusts*, a title snobbishly imposed by the late Rupert Hart-Davis, publisher].) *3rd December 2001.*

Brin, David. **Kiln People.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30355-8, 492pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a "bound manuscript" rather than a properly typeset proof, so the pagination given above may bear little relation to the finished thing; Brin's first novel for Tor, it's a "saga about artificial humanity.") *January 2002.*

Brooke, Keith, and Nick Gevers, eds. **Infinity Plus One.** Introduction by Peter F. Hamilton. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-23-4, 281pp, hardcover, cover by Dominic Harman, £45. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous "De Luxe" edition [not seen]; this is a signed edition [i.e. signed by all the contributors, on two specially bound-in pages], limited to 500 numbered hardcover copies; it contains 13 stories, by Michael Bishop, Tony Daniel, Paul Di Filippo, Mary Gentle, James Patrick Kelly, Garry Kilworth, Ian R. MacLeod, Kim Newman, Patrick O'Leary, Kit Reed, Kim Stanley Robinson, Michael Swanwick and Jeff VanderMeer, which have appeared online in the electronic magazine *Infinity Plus*; most are reprinted from other sources, such as the US magazines *Asimov's SF*, *F&SF*, *Omni* and *Science Fiction Age*; one story, "Old Soldiers" by Kit Reed, seems to be completely original; overall, it looks to be an excellent selection of material.) *Late entry: July publication, received in November 2001.*

Campbell, Ramsey. **Pact of the Fathers.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87869-9, 414pp, hardcover, cover by Barry Appell, \$26.95. (Horror

novel, first edition; reviewed by David Mathew [from an advance proof copy that we didn't see] in *Interzone* 173; the oft-praised Ramsey Campbell is Britain's foremost horror writer, but – like his previous novels, *The Last Voice They Hear* [1998] and *Silent Children* [2000] – this new book is published in America only; thus prophets are without honour in their own backyards.) *13th December 2001.*

Cavelos, Jeanne. **Invoking Darkness: The Passing of the Techno-Mages, Book III.** "Babylon 5." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-43833-7, 357pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ashley Wood, \$6.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "based on an original outline by J. Michael Straczynski," it's the last in a more-ambitious-than-usual trilogy that began with *Casting Shadows* and *Summoning Light* – the first of which was described by at least one reviewer as "the best *Babylon 5* book to date... doesn't deserve to be classified as a mere 'media novel'"; Jeanne Cavelos seems more serious-minded than most authors of spinoffery: she is a trained scientist ["astrophysicist and mathematician"], has worked in publishing, and has written such non-fiction books as *The Science of Star Wars* and *The Science of The X-Files*.) *28th November 2001.*

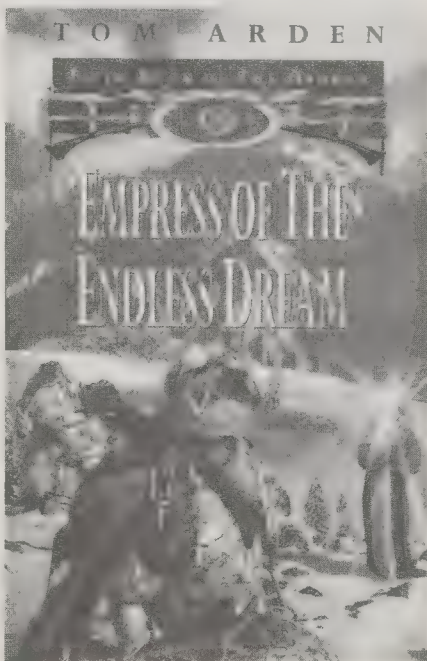
Clements, Jonathan, and Helen McCarthy. **The Anime Encyclopedia: A Guide to Japanese Animation Since 1917.** Stone Bridge Press [PO Box 8208, Berkeley, CA 94707, USA], ISBN 1-880656-64-7, xviii+545pp, trade paperback, \$24.95. (Lightly illustrated A-Z of Japanese animated movies, many of them sf and fantasy; first edition; it appears to be the biggest and most detailed book on its subject so far, with three-columned pages of small print; Neil Gaiman commends it as "impressive, exhaustive, labyrinthine, and obsessive... an astonishing piece of work.") *Late entry: October publication, received in November 2001.*

Cook, Robin. **Shock.** "Medical technology manipulated by greed." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90280-7, 342pp, hardcover, £10. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 2001; since the success of his early novel *Coma* in the 1970s, Dr Cook has continued churning out these bio-medical thrillers, some of them more science-fictional than others; many get made into TV movies; unfortunately, the one-word titles – *Mutation*, *Contagion*, *Invasion*, *Toxin*, *Vector*, *Abduction*, and now *Shock* – make them all rather hard to tell apart.) *23rd November 2001.*

Davidson, Avram. **The Other Nineteenth Century: A Story Collection.** Edited by Gnania Davis and Henry Wessells. Tor, ISBN 0-312-84874-9, 327pp, hardcover, cover by Tom Kidd, \$27.95. (Fantasy collection, first edition; it contains 23 "long-out-of-print" stories on mainly historical themes – "strange Mitteleuropas... magic in Victorian England and on the American frontier" – by the late lamented Davidson [1923-1993]; a long subtitle just about sums it up: "Containing Startling Revelations of the Lives of Literary Persons; also, Truthful Accounts of Living Fossils, Montaverde's Camera, The Irradiation Machine, and El Vilvoy de las Islas; with Heinous Crimes, Noble Ladies in Adversity, Brilliant Detections, Imperial Eunuchs, Political Machinations, etc., etc.") *20th December 2001.*

Dedman, Stephen. **Shadows Bite.** "A magic noir thriller." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87783-8, 334pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; Australian author Dedman's third novel, it's set in Los Angeles, and involves a necromancer, demons and vampires.) *10th December 2001.*

Dick, Philip K. **Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said.** "SF Masterworks, 46." Gollancz, ISBN 1-



85798-341-6, 204pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1974; one of Dick's better-remembered reality-benders.) 8th November 2001.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **Supermen: Tales of the Posthuman Future**. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-27569-2, xiii+450pp, trade paperback, \$17.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to Dozois's earlier anthologies, *Explorers: SF Adventures to Far Horizons* and *The Furthest Horizon: SF Adventures to the Far Future* [both 2000], it contains reprint stories on the superman or "posthuman entity" theme, chronologically arranged from 1953 to 2000, by Poul Anderson, James Blish, Eric Brown, Ted Chiang, Samuel R. Delany, Greg Egan ["Border Guards" from *Interzone*], Joe Haldeman, Paul McAuley ["The Gardens of Saturn" from *Interzone*], Ian R. MacLeod, Robert Reed, Joanna Russ, Robert Silverberg, Brian Stableford, Bruce Sterling, Charles Stross ["Toast: A Con Report" from *Interzone*], Michael Swanwick, Liz Williams ["A Child of the Dead" from *Interzone*], Gene Wolfe, Roger Zelazny and other worthies; recommended.) 7th January 2002.

Egner, Eugen. **Androids from Milk**. Translated by Mike Mitchell. Dedalus, ISBN 1-903517-02-8, 202pp, B-format paperback, cover by David Bird, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1999; this is the first English-language edition, and it's described by the publishers as "an anarchic, surreal and zany novel which reads like Kafka rewritten by Monty Python"; Eugen Egner was born in 1951, and is known in his native Germany as a cartoonist as well as the author of radio plays, short stories and novels.) 29th November 2001.

Erikson, Steven. **Memories of Ice: A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04624-2, xiv+898pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; third of a promised ten-volume sequence of massive tomes by this Canadian author; there does not appear to be a hardcover edition.) 6th December 2001.

Feist, Raymond E. **Krondor: Tear of the Gods**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648356-9, vi+372pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy computer-game novelization, first published in the USA, 2000; based, like its predecessors, on the game *Return to Krondor* [produced by Pyrotechnix, Inc.], it's Book III of "The Riftwar Legacy" – although that's not stated on the title page or cover.) 3rd December 2001.

Feist, Raymond E. **Magician**. "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712328-0, 681pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1982; it follows the text of the 1992 revised edition; this is no. 20 in the "Voyager Classics" series – they seem to be defining "classics" here as "books which have sold well for us in the past.") 3rd December 2001.

Feist, Raymond E., and William R. Forstchen. **Honoured Enemy**. "Legends of the Riftwar." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224719-4, 323pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the opener in a new series from a pair the back-cover blurb calls "two of fantasy's greatest authors.") 2nd January 2002.

Ferring, David. **Konrad: Book I of the Konrad Trilogy**. "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-156-7, 221pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published

in the UK, 1990 [not "1989" as it states in this edition]; "David Ferring" is a pseudonym of David Garnett.) December 2001.

Fisher, Jude. **The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring: Visual Companion**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-711624-1, 70pp, very large-format hardcover, £14.99. (Copiously illustrated companion to the "peoples and places" in Peter Jackson's movie based on J. R. R. Tolkien's great fantasy novel; first edition; "Jude Fisher" is a pseudonym of HarperCollins editor Jane Johnson, who has also co-written novels as "Gabriel King.") 6th November 2001.

Ford, John M. **The Last Hot Time**. "A Contemporary Fantasy." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87578-9, 205pp, trade paperback, cover by Tristan Elwell, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a slim one, but it was one-time World Fantasy Award-winner John M. Ford's "first new novel in seven years.") 19th November 2001.

Garnett, David. **Bikini Planet**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45860-5, 279pp, A-format paperback, cover by Patrick Jones, \$5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; this is the first American edition; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 155.) December 2001.

Goodkind, Terry. **The Pillars of Creation**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07161-3, 557pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; this is Book Seven of "The Sword of Truth," although it does not state as much on the front cover or title page; the author's dedication is rather eye-popping: "Dedicated to the people in the United States Intelligence Community who, for decades, have valiantly fought to preserve life and liberty, while being ridiculed, condemned, demonized, and shackled by the jackals of evil"; wow, man... maybe you need to, like, cool it.) 6th December 2001.

Gray, Julia. **The Crystal Desert: Book Three of The Guardian Cycle**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-093-8, 566pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Julia Gray" is believed to be a pseudonym of Mark and Julia Smith, who previously wrote as "Jonathan Wylie.") 6th December 2001.

Green, Simon R. **Drinking Midnight Wine**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07246-6, 265pp, C-format

paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it appears to be a stand-alone – not part of one of Green's earlier series.) 15th November 2001.

Greenberg, Martin H., and Larry Segriff, eds. **Silicon Dreams**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0018-X, 319pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 12 all-new tales on robotic themes, by Robin Wayne Bailey, Gary A. Braunbeck, Julie E. Czerneda, James P. Hogan, William H. Keith, Jr., Paul Levinson, Jane Lindskold, Jody Lynn Nye, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and others; it's yet another of a long series of such paperback-original sf, fantasy and horror anthologies produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books – i.e. the ongoing Greenberg/DAW "pulp magazine.") December 2001.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Obsidian Butterfly: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-132-2, 585pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; ninth in this crime/dark fantasy series, the success of which presumably rides on that of the similar [but quite unrelated] TV show, *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*.) 6th December 2001.

Haydon, Elizabeth. **Prophecy: Child of Earth**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-991-0, 558pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; sequel to *Rhapsody: Child of Blood*.) 8th November 2001.

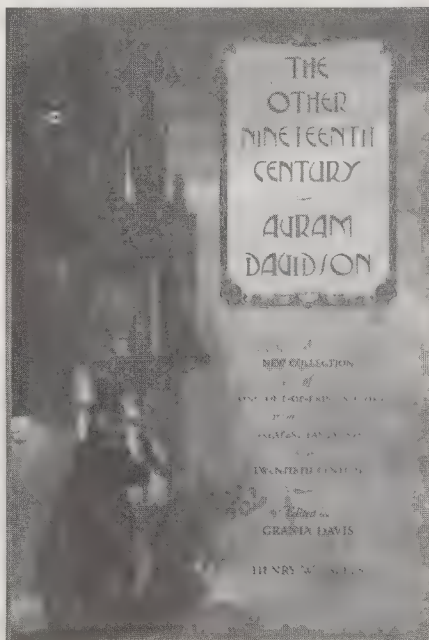
Haydon, Elizabeth. **Rhapsody: Child of Blood**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07279-2, 609pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this is actually the second UK mass-market paperback edition: there was a previous one from Millennium, in August 2000.) 8th November 2001.

Howe, John. **Myth & Magic: The Art of John Howe**. Foreword by Peter Jackson. Afterword by Alan Lee. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-710795-1, 141pp, hardcover, cover by Howe, £19.99. (Fantasy art portfolio, first edition; John Howe [born 1957], Canadian-born, Swiss-resident, is of course best known for his illustrations to J. R. R. Tolkien's work; this attractive, large-format book reproduces most of those, along with many others done for a wide range of publishers; it also contains brief appreciations of Howe's work by Robin Hobb, Robert Holdstock, Anne McCaffrey, Ian McKellen and Brian Sibley.) 3rd December 2001.

Irvine, Ian. **The Way Between the Worlds: Volume Four of The View from the Mirror Quartet**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-073-3, xxx+635pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Sofilas, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1999; it's "the stunning conclusion to Ian Irvine's bestselling tale of magic and adventure"; the author was born in Australia in 1950, and has a PhD in marine sciences.) 6th December 2001.

Jeter, K. W. **Blade Runner 4: Eye & Talon**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-867-1, 236pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Spinoff sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; after a hiatus of about three years, this is Jeter's third sequel-by-another-hand to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* [1968] and to the 1982 film based on it, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [movie title courtesy of the late Alan E. Nourse].) 6th November 2001.

Jones, Stephen. **Creepshows: The Illustrated Stephen King Movie Guide**. Introduction by



Mick Garriss. *Titan*, ISBN 1-84023-309-5, 192pp, very large-format paperback, £16.99. (Copiously illustrated guide to all films, TV shows, etc, based on Stephen King's novels and stories [mainly horror]; first edition; it includes interview material

with King and others, and seems to be very thorough; likely to be the best reference book of its kind for some time, it's recommended to all King addicts – which should be a few million people.) 23rd November 2001.

King, J. Robert. *Lancelot du Lethe*. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30118-0, 461pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Ruddell, \$25.95. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; it's a follow-up to the author's *Mad Merlin* [2000], which we didn't see.) 13th December 2001.

Kingsbury, Donald. *Psychohistorical Crisis*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86102-8, 511pp, hardcover, cover by Donato, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; veteran Canadian author Kingsbury's first new book in some years, it's set in the 761st century and seems to be a take on Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" trilogy [although not formally a sequel to that work] – "a loving homage to Asimov and a dialogue with him"; with its long pages, this is a seriously big, ambitious-looking, hard sf novel, complete with technical appendices.) 18th December 2001.

Koontz, Dean. *One Door Away from Heaven*. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7072-4, 597pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; there may be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; according to the brief Author's Note on the last page, this novel is intended as an attack on "utilitarian bioethics" – not a phrase we have heard before, but apparently a real philosophy to which Koontz is passionately opposed.) 20th December 2001.

Kunzel, Bonnie, and Suzanne Manczuk. *First Contact: A Reader's Selection of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Scarecrow Press, ISBN 0-8108-4028-6, ix+155pp, trade paperback, £20.45. (Librarians' annotated guide to sf and fantasy books suitable for younger readers; first published in the USA, 2001; this is the American first edition with a UK price and publication date specified, available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; it's an amiable, if rather brief, jog-trot around various recent manifestations of the genre, divided into thematic sections under such headings as "Alien Contact," "Alternate Reality," "Brain Power," "Hackers and Droids," "In Legendary Camelot," "Once Upon a Time," "Postapocalypse," "Space Opera," "Time Warp," etc; each entry consists of an approximately 100-word description of the book in question; there's a full author-and-title index; unfortunately, in the entry on *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf is misspelled "Gandalph" – not really an excusable error at this of all times!) 10th January 2002.

Laymon, Richard. *No Sanctuary*. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-6931-9, 281pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; this may be the last novel from Laymon, who died in February 2001, in his early 50s.) 13th December 2001.

Lee, Tanith. *White as Snow*. "The Fairy Tale Series." Introduction by Terri Windling. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87549-5, 319pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Canty, \$14.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; based on the traditional story of "Snow White," but very definitely for adults, this is the first volume in a revival of editor Windling's "Fairy Tale" series, and the first to be written by Tanith Lee; reviewed by Chris

Gilmore in *Interzone* 167 – he called it "a true masterpiece.") 14th December 2001.

Leiber, Fritz. *The Second Book of Lankhmar*. "Fantasy Masterworks, 24." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07358-6, 694pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £8.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; it contains the novel *The Swords of Lankhmar* [1968] and the collections *Swords and Ice Magic* [1977] and *The Knight and Knave of Swords* [1988], all first published in the USA; recommended – with this fine fat volume, containing the second half of the adventures of Fahrd and the Gray Mouser, the "Fantasy Masterworks" series now has all the best sword-and-sorcery fiction in the bag.) 6th December 2001.

Leith, Valery. *The Riddled Night*. "Everien: Book Two." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-324-6, 517pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000.) 8th November 2001.

Leith, Valery. *The Way of the Rose*. "Everien: Book Three." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-549-4, 415pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; "Valery Leith" is a pseudonym of the American-born but British-resident sf writer Tricia Sullivan.) 15th November 2001.

Lewis, C. S. *That Hideous Strength*. "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712202-0, xii+428pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1945; third in the "Ransom" trilogy, following *Out of the Silent Planet* [1938] and *Perelandra* [1943]; unlike the old Pan mass-market paperback edition which many of us read in decades past, this is the full, unabridged text of Lewis's anti-scientific romance; it's number 17 in the dark-blue-covered, jacket-flapped HarperCollins "Voyager Classics" series.) 3rd December 2001.

Murphy, Pat. *Adventures in Time and Space with Max Merriwell*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86643-7, 287pp, hardcover, cover by Greg Splenka, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; follow-up to Murphy's *There and Back Again*, by Max Merriwell [1999] and *Wild Angel*, by Mary Merriwell, by Max Merriwell [2000]; despite the over-tricksy authorial games evidently being played here, these books have been described as "no-holds-barred, flat-out adventure" and have generally been well received.) 6th November 2001.

Norton, Andre. *The Gates to Witch World*. Introduction by C. J. Cherryh. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30050-8, 461pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, \$27.95. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; the three linked novels it contains – *Witch World* [1963], *Web of the Witch World* [1964] and *Year of the Unicorn* [1965] – were first published separately in the USA as paperback originals by Ace Books; like Robert E. Howard and J. R. R. Tolkien, Ms Norton [born Alice Mary Norton, 1912] has a lot to answer for; unlike them, she still lives – "in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where she presides over High Hallack, a resource and retreat for writers.") 17th December 2001.

O'Leary, Patrick. *The Impossible Bird*. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30337-X, 365pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; O'Leary's third novel, it's described in editor David G. Hartwell's accompanying publicity letter as "one of the most emotionally powerful and continually surprising sf novels I have read in years.") January 2002.

Olton, Jerry. *The Getaway Special*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87777-3, 400pp, hardcover, cover by Vincent di Fate, \$26.95. (Sf novel, first edition; like the author's previous novel, *Abandon in Place* [2000], it's hard sf of the *Analog* school – but with a jolly, boyish feel to it.) 20th December 2001.

Perry, Anne. *Come Armageddon*. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-6940-8, 377pp, hardcover, cover by Lee Gibbons, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; second in a series, it "continues the exploration of the eternal battle between good and evil which began in *Tathea*" [which we didn't see]; Anne Perry [born 1938], who lives in Scotland, is best known as a crime novelist, "author of the acclaimed Victorian mystery series featuring Thomas and Charlotte Pitt, and the William Monk series.") 13th December 2001.

Pratt, Fletcher. *The Well of the Unicorn*. "Fantasy Masterworks, 23." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07267-9, xii+338pp, B-format paperback, cover by Paul Gregory, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1948; Murray Fletcher Pratt [1897-1956] is best remembered for his humorous collaborations with L. Sprague de Camp, but this was one of two major solo fantasy novels he wrote – in the days long before fantasy was fashionable as a genre.) 8th November 2001.

Reynolds, Alastair. *Diamond Dogs*. Introduction by Stephen Baxter. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-20-X, 111pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 400 numbered hardcover copies.) Late entry: July publication, received in November 2001.

Rhodes, Gary D. *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film*. Foreword by George E. Turner. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0988-6, viii+352pp, hardcover, \$65. (Illustrated critical study of the 1932 Hollywood horror film directed by Victor Halperin [who? – you may well ask] and starring Bela Lugosi; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; this is a large-format book with double-columned pages and lots of text as well as movie stills and other illustrations; it seems to bring an immense amount of scholarly apparatus to bear on one rather minor [but interesting] horror movie; if you want the definitive book on *White Zombie*, this is clearly it.) December 2001.

Rickman, Phil. *The Cure of Souls*. "A Revd. Merrily Watkins Mystery." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90623-3, 486pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; fourth in the "spiritual procedural" series about a female exorcist called Merrily Watkins, following *The Wine of Angels* [1998], *Midwinter of the Spirit* [1999] and *A Crown of Lights* [2000]; the last of those we never saw.) 7th December 2001.

Sarrantonio, Al, ed. *Redshift: Extreme Visions of Speculative Fiction*. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45859-1, xiv+544pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; it's dedicated "To Harlan, of course"; that, plus the tell-tale word "Visions" in the title, tell us where this book is coming from: it's nothing less than Sarrantonio's attempt to do a *Dangerous Visions* for 2001; the trouble is, he's known as a horror writer and editor, and a good deal of this anthology smacks of that genre rather than sf *pur*; it contains all-new stories by Catherine Asaro, Neal Barrett, Jr., Stephen Bax-

ter; Gregory Benford, Jack Dann, Paul Di Filippo, Thomas M. Disch, Elizabeth Hand, Joe Haldeman, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, James Patrick Kelly, Kathe Koja & Barry Malzberg, Ursula K. Le Guin, Michael Moorcock, David Morrell [?], Larry Niven, Joyce Carol Oates [!], Kit Reed, Rudy Rucker & John Shirley, Dan Simmons, Michael Marshall Smith, Harry Turtledove, Gene Wolfe and a few others; certainly a good line-up, although the editor's gushy, slangy, sub-Ellissonian introduction and story-intros may put some readers' teeth on edge.) *December 2001.*

Schmidt, Stanley. **Which Way to the Future?: Selected Essays from Analog.** Introduction by Marvin Minsky. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30104-0, 255pp, hardcover, cover by Rick Fischer, \$24.95. (Collection of speculative essays by the editor of a leading US sf magazine; first edition; bald, heavily-bearded Stan Schmidt, editor of *Analog* [formerly *Astounding*] for the past 20-odd years, has never quite gained the stature of his famous predecessor, John W. Campbell, but like Campbell he has written many provocative editorial essays over the years, and this book gives us a selection of some 35 of them.) *17th December 2001.*

Scott, Melissa, and Lisa A. Barnett. **Point of Dreams.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87589-4, 352pp, trade paperback, cover by David Bowers, \$15.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; commended as "a fantasy of manners, a mystery, and a swashbuckler all at the same time," it's a follow-up to the same authors' *Point of Hopes* [1995] – stylish, witty, theatrical, cod-Elizabethan stuff; apparently there was a Tor hardcover edition in February 2001, but we didn't see that.) *14th December 2001.*

Sears, Richard. **Last Day.** Forge, ISBN 0-312-87898-2, 254pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror thriller, first edition; although this is presented as a second novel, following the author's "paranormal thriller" *First Born*, the author photograph on the back jacket flap, and certain other clues, would seem to indicate that "Richard Sears" is a pseudonym for novelist Richard La Plante [born 1948] – who presumably has changed his byline in order to get out from under the loom of his ex-wife's more successful writing career.) *20th November 2001.*

Sibley, Brian. **The Lord of the Rings: Official Movie Guide.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-711908-9, 119pp, very large-format paperback, £10.99. (Copiously illustrated companion to Peter Jackson's movie based on J. R. R. Tolkien's great fantasy novel; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the author, Brian Sibley, was the writer and producer of the lengthy 1981 BBC Radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*.) *6th November 2001.*

Stanton, Michael N. **Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards: Exploring the Wonders and Worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings.** St Martin's Press/Palgrave, ISBN 0-312-23826-6, xii+192pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Critical study of Tolkien's fantasy masterpiece, first edition; this seems to be a concise and amiable primer, by an English teacher from the University of Vermont; his conclusion is that "in *The Lord of the Rings* twentieth-century literature has a great treasure"; to adapt an earlier comment by Tom Shippey, one could claim that *LoTR* is the people's *Ulysses* – and *The Silmarillion* is the people's *Finnegans Wake*.) *16th November 2001.*

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **John Wyndham: Creator of the Cosy Catastrophe – A Working Bibliography.** 3rd edition. "Galactic

Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 16." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-58-0, ix+125pp, small-press paperback, £6. (Sf author bibliography; the first edition appeared in 1985, and this one is much updated and improved [and in a handier format]; Wyndham remains one of the most important names in British sf, and this modestly-priced but exhaustively detailed book is certainly the best bibliography of his work; as ever, Mr Stephensen-Payne's hard labours are to be commended.) *November 2001.*

Suckling, Nigel. **The Angel Companion.** Pavilion, ISBN 1-86205-365-0, 96pp, very large-format hardcover, cover by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, £14.99. (Copiously illustrated text on angels ["religious fantasy"?], first edition; it has absolutely nothing to do with the *Angel* TV series [see following item], but is concerned with images of traditional angels from a wide variety of sources; artists featured include Blake, Burne-Jones and Gustave Doré, among many others more obscure; an attractive gift-book for some, perhaps.) *20th December 2001.*

Tallis, Frank. **Sensing Others.** Penguin, ISBN 0-140-27884-2, 296pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Mainstream novel with sf elements, first published in the UK, 2000; a second novel by the author of the "mainstream sf" *Killing Time* [1999]; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 155.) *29th November 2001.*

Topping, Keith. **Hollywood Vampire: A Revised and Updated Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Angel.** Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0601-7, vi+280pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Episode guide to the horror-fantasy TV series *Angel* [commenced 1999], a spinoff from *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*; the first edition appeared in 2000 [but we never saw it]; it's unillustrated and unauthorized, but crammed with information, as Virgin Publishing's neat little TV programme guides usually are.) *6th December 2001.*

Turtledove, Harry. **American Empire: Blood & Iron.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-71551-0, 503pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £18.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first

published in the USA, 2001; first part of a follow-up series to the author's three-volume "Great War" series [not to be confused with his "Worldwar" series, or any of the other half-dozen series he has had on the go recently].) *13th December 2001.*

Turtledove, Harry. **Colonisation: After-shocks.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-76910-6, 661pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; third part of a follow-up series to the author's four-volume "Worldwar" series.) *13th December 2001.*

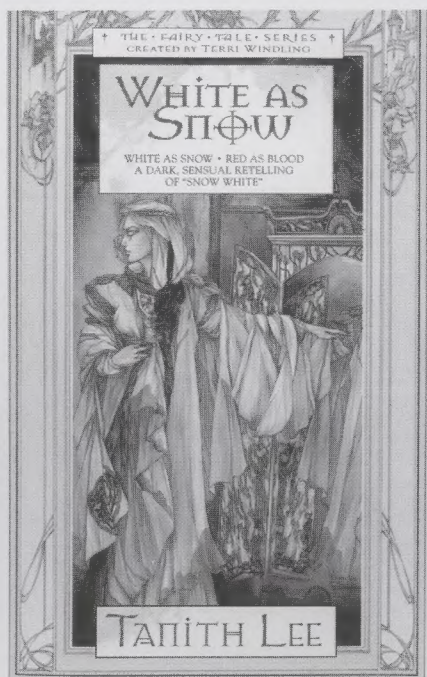
Vieth, Errol. **Screening Science: Contexts, Texts, and Science in Fifties Science Fiction Film.** Scarecrow Press, ISBN 0-8108-4023-5, xix+263pp, hardcover, £52.25. (Lightly illustrated critical study of 1950s sf movies; first published in the USA, 2001; this is the American first edition with a UK price and publication date specified, available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; it seems to cover a good range of the films of its period, but it's definitely a "theoretically-informed" academic work [dread words for some, but maybe an enticement to the seriously-minded], by an Australian who teaches at Central Queensland University; as with most "theoretically-informed" studies, it quotes other critics, e.g. Susan Sontag, copiously.) *10th January 2002.*

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **The Dragon Society.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30007-9, 428pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Dragon Weather* [1999].) *19th December 2001.*

Wharton, Ken. **Divine Intervention.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00886-0, 391pp, A-format paperback, cover by Edwin Herder, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this appears to be a debut novel by a new American writer; Allen Steele commends it as "proof positive that a hard-sf novel can seriously deal with physics, religion, and interstellar colonization, and also be a page-turning adventure story. Reminiscent of Poul Anderson's best work.") *December 2001.*

Wells, H. G. **The Invisible Man.** "SF Masterworks, 47." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-949-X, 138pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1897; this appears to be a truncated reprint of the Orion/Everyman paperback edition of 1995 – i.e. shorn of its introduction and notes; in which case, it seems odd that they have left in the "Note on the Text," which states, *inter alia*, "This Everyman edition reprints the American text, with the exception of obvious errors, some of which are mentioned in the Notes..."; despite such quibbles, the book is highly recommended – a masterpiece of the scientific romance, ranking [in our estimation] just slightly below the other Wells masterpieces already reprinted in this series, i.e. *The Time Machine* [1895], *The War of the Worlds* [1898] and *The First Men in the Moon* [1901].) *6th December 2001.*

Winter, Douglas E. **Clive Barker: The Dark Fantastic.** "The Authorized Biography." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-255041-5, xiv+671pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Biography of a leading horror writer and film-maker; first edition [?]; is it really the appropriate time yet for an exhaustive 700-page biography of a writer who was born in the 1950s and is still presumably in mid-career? ah, well, maybe so, given the subject's Hollywood connections.) *10th December 2001.*





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